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Western Trails

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RED RUNS THE RIO

by LEE E. WELLS

STORIES BY
Gunnison Steele
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Western Trails

Vol. XXXVII No. 3

A. A. WYN, Editor

An ACE Magazine

R. M. DREYER, Managing Editor

RED RUNS THE RIO (Novelette) . . . . . **Lee E. Wells** 4
Brett Malone almost gets lead poisoning when six-gun rattlers strike out at him.

THE MAKE-BELIEVE MARSHAL . . . . . **Gunnison Steele** 22
This badge-toter betrays his gold star for gold dollars—and incidentally betrays himself.

POLECAT PAYOFF . . . . . **Barry Gardner** 28
The oldster cooks up a surefire send-off for a calaboose coyote.

OWLHOOT BADGE-TOTER . . . . . **J. Edward Leithead** 31
When a badman becomes a sheriff, he finds himself on the outs with both the law and the outlaw.

BOOM TOWN BETRAYERS . . . . . **Martin Wolsey** 41
Phantom killers make a ghost town out of booming Eldorado.

COLT MISSION FOR A PEACEFUL HOMBRE (Novelette) . . . . **C. William Harrison** 50
It takes more than a clever line of palaver to hogtie a herd of rustling renegades.

VIGILANTE VENGEANCE . . . . . **S. and I. Richin** 66
The true tale of a ruthless outlaw who has the manners of a gentleman, but the heart of a gun-devil.

POWDERSMOKE IN PANAMINT . . . . . **Felix Flammonde** 69
Chill lead type and hot lead bullets are a combination that can clean up any bandit town.

COLD DECK FOR TWO-BIT JAKE . . . . . **Stephen Payne** 78
Because he cannot hobble his tongue, a two-bit crook talks himself into trigger trouble.

STAMPEDE 82
Powder River Bill and his writin' rannyhans.

EMPTY HOLSTERS . . . . . **Wilson L. Covert** 84
Nobody trusts a rustler's amigo—especially if he's a rancher who hasn't lost cattle!

Cover by James Krank

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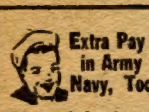

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Red Runs the Rio

By
Lee E. Wells

Pistol-fire lanced through the darkness.

Exciting Outlaw Novelette

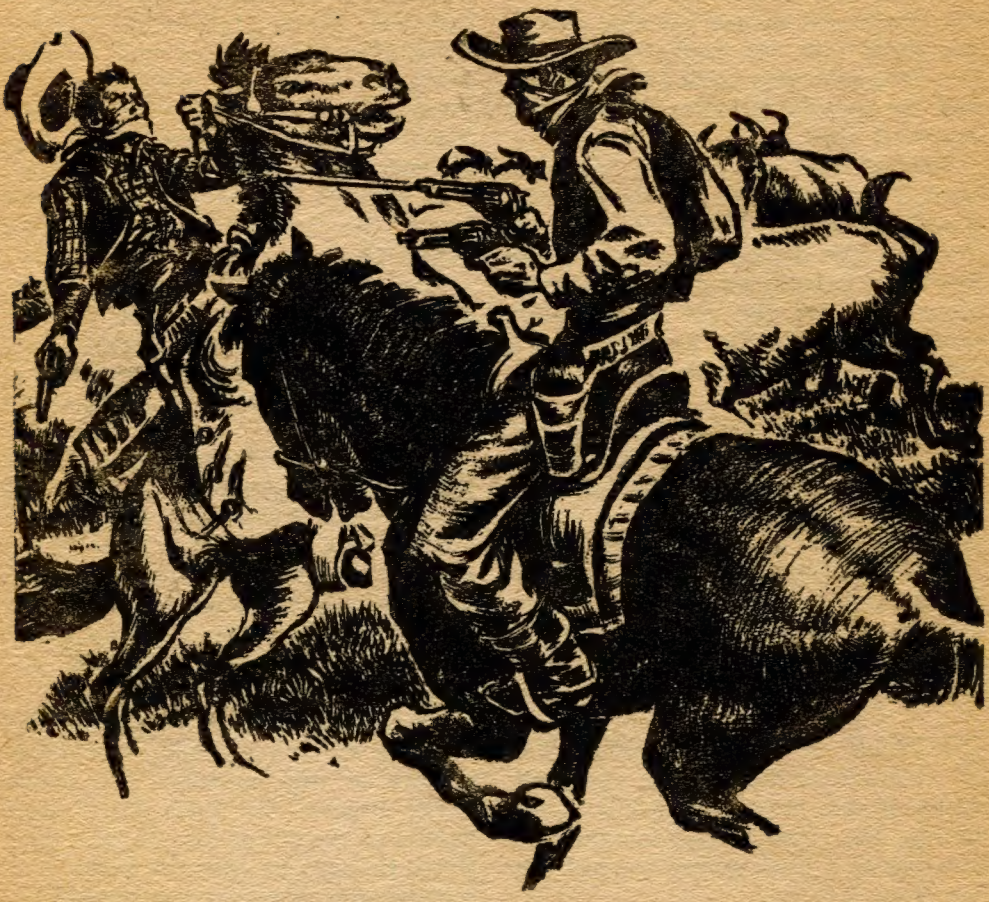
CHAPTER I

THE noise in the saloon cut off sharply, and the silence seemed thunderous. Brett Malone sensed it instantly, and his sharp hazel eyes jumped to the bar mirror. His slug glass remained poised close to his lips. Three unknown men were boxing him in, three thin-lipped gunnies with murder in their eyes.

Del Norte, Brett thought, is a right welcoming town. He'd come out of the mountains and into the border town not half an hour before. He didn't know anyone, yet his taut nerves already cried a warning of swift gunplay to come.

The men who had been drinking on either side of Brett a moment ago were gone. There was a wide bare space of heavy, polished mahogany instead. The click of poker chips and the buzzing talk from the tables had stopped. Brett Malone's freckled face tightened, and there was something

Brett Malone fogged into Del Norte to meet up with his brother. But a Colt committee welcomed him instead. And Malone had to drop his peaceful mission to ride a trail that led six ways to boot hill.



cold and glinting in his normally friendly eyes. The gunhawks were close now, and there could be no mistaking their prey. It was Brett Malone.

Brett lowered his slug glass and turned casually. His eyes flicked from one stubbled, hawk face to the other. "I ain't had the pleasure, gents," he drawled.

"No pleasure," one growled, "except for us. You sure hit Del Norte when it's plumb unhealthy for lawmen."

"Lawmen!" Brett exclaimed, and his eyes widened again. He pushed away from the bar, clearing his arm for a fast draw.

"That's the brand," the leader sneered. "Any objections?"

"Plenty—" Brett started.

His word was a signal for fast action. Three hands stabbed toward holstered guns. Brett's move was instantaneous. His t a l o n e d fingers blurred down and swept his Colt from leather. He swayed to one side, crouching against the bar. His six angled up and he fired at the leader. Simultaneously, wood splinters flew just above his head.

His own slug caught the leader

squarely in the chest, and the man flew backward as though hit by a giant fist. His second winged a gunhawk's arm and the man grabbed his shirt sleeve where blood spurted and the bone had shattered. Brett felt a searing brand across his side and it staggered him. He fired, but missed. Powdersmoke was thick and blinding, and the roaring thunder of the guns deafened him.

His battered hat jumped from his head. For a split second he saw the weaving form of the third gunman, the thin lips drawn back over white teeth in a fighting snarl. Brett's wrist flipped up and the six bucked back against his palm. The gunman's head snapped back, and he fell with a sodden thud.

Gradually the smoke cleared and Brett's ears stopped ringing. He still crouched against the bar, the hammer of his Colt dogged back, his glinting, hazel eyes darting about the room. He gazed at blank, stunned faces that showed amazement and fear. Two dead men lay sprawled just before him and the third staggered out the door, holding a dangling, useless arm.

SLOWLY Brett straightened. His side pained him and his shirt felt sticky. A slow stain spread just above his hip. His eyes jumped instantly to one side as a man moved toward the bar from a table.

The stranger's voice held a slight chuckle and a slow drawl. "That's a mighty sudden six you pack, pilgrim. You'll be powerful welcome in Del Norte."

"I can see that," Brett said thickly and nodded toward the men on the floor. "The town sure makes strangers feel right at home."

"Them? Oh, they don't like badge-toters." The stranger bent over one of the forms and calmly ran his hand into the dead man's shirt pockets. He straightened and held out a metal disk to Brett. "They're part of The Six."

Brett stared uncomprehendingly at the metal tag. It had a crudely cut figure six in the brass. The stranger turned it over. The reverse side held the badly cut shape of a coiled snake, the fangs protruding.

"I don't savvy this," Brett said. He pushed his hat back on his dark, unruly hair. He was tall, yet slender and lithe. His faded shirt and patched levis were stained with dust and sweat. His arms were long, muscular; his wide shoulders sloped down to a narrow waist bound by the brass-studded gunbelt. His tooled, high-heeled boots were dust-caked, cracked a little across the toe.

The stranger gave him a sharp, questioning look. "Never heard of The Six? Pilgrim, you sure will buck a cold deck. Some more of these jaspers will be back. We'd better make a fast trail out of here."

The man caught Brett's arm and led him the length of the bar and out a rear door. Events had piled up so swiftly and inexplicably that Brett allowed himself to be hustled along an alley between blank adobe walls to the next street. There the stranger scouted left and right and stepped cautiously out on the walk.

Few people noticed them, but the stranger acted as though he expected gunfire at any moment. His hands never strayed far from the walnut handle of the six at his hip, and once Brett thought he saw the bulge of a hideout gun in a shoulder holster beneath the loose shirt.

The stranger stopped before a thick plank door in a blank adobe wall. He fitted a key to the lock, glanced hurriedly up the street, and then opened the door. "Inside. We'll be safe here for a while," he whispered.

Brett stepped into the cool darkness of the room. A line of windows along the opposite wall admitted light and opened on a sun-drenched patio. The stranger closed the door and slid a heavy bolt into place. He straightened, grinned.

"Take off your hat and rest your feet. There'll be no gun slinging here."

Brett stood motionless, eyes hard

and direct. "I ain't never seen you before, hombre, and strangers in Del Norte ain't been too healthy for me."

"Hang and rattle a minute, friend," the man said. "My name's Art Norton and here's my brand."

He sat down, pulled off a boot, and took a gold badge from an ingenious pocket inside the footgear. Brett stared at the U. S. Deputy Marshal's badge and then up into the smiling, slightly pinched face.

ART NORTON was small. The top of his sandy hair came to about Brett's chin. He had washed-out blue eyes that were laughing now, but Brett felt they could become as cold as twin gun muzzles. His nose was slightly broken; his lips thin and irregular, almost bloodless. His slight body was wiry, dressed neatly in a dark blue shirt and black trousers stuffed into worn boots.

Brett sank down in a near-by chair. "Now who are The Six and what argument did they have with me?"

"You look like a fellow officer of mine out of San Antonio. He was supposed to come down on this job but there were some last minute changes. I was sent and I came before The Six knew a lawman was coming."

"Who are The Six?" Brett persisted.

Norton sighed. "Hombre, I reckon you could make a fortune in rewards if you could name them. They're six unknown men who head all the rustling, gambling, and killing in Del Norte and a hundred miles any direction from it."

"Seems like with all that tally you'd have some lead on them," Brett said.

"Not on the six themselves. We know some of their lieutenants and a heap of the tinhorns and gunnies who carry their sign. But not The Six. That's my job—and yours if you want it."

"Mine!" Brett jerked erect. He grinned and shook his head. "Not me, Norton. I'm just taking a pasear down here to find my brother. He's located a mine on the Mexican side of the river."

"Your brother's name?" Norton asked.

"Jack Malone. I'm Brett."

The deputy marshal was silent for a moment. Then he said: "I got some news for you, Malone, and I think you'll throw in. Jack ain't got a mine. It's owned by a gent named Cass Oaker. He's one of the lieutenants I was talking about, runs the Rio Saloon here in Del Norte."

Brett leaned forward. "What about Jack?" he asked.

Norton looked sharply at Brett, and his thin lips puckered. His voice was level, weighted with meaning. "There was a gunning in an alley a week ago. Jack was fixing to go to court about the mine claim, both here and in Mexico. But they got him. There's a new marker in boot hill."

Silence, thick and heavy, settled on the room. Brett stared at Norton, and his chin settled in an angry, fighting angle. His fist slowly closed and the knuckles clenched white. Faint footsteps sounded in the street beyond the planked door.

Norton rose and drew his gun, dogged back the hammer. The footsteps faded away. Norton turned to Brett.

"They've trailed you here. Do you want to throw in, or do you want to hit the dust out of town?"

Brett choked angrily, regained his voice. "I run from no one. I aim to find who killed my brother."

Norton nodded slightly, but his eyes remained cold and grim. "I won't hide any brands. You might find yourself planted beside your brother. You don't know where the next slug's coming from—or when. You got a chance in a thousand, no more."

Brett nodded slowly. "I gathered that, the way those coyotes played. Just count me in, hombre, and let me pick up the trail. I aim to get me some polecats."

Norton chuckled. "You got yourself a job. Now here's what you do first—"

CHAPTER II

DAN PARDEE, mayor of Del Norte, leaned back in his chair. The sunlight edged his series of chins and made his fat moon face slightly red. His pudgy hands were folded across his big paunch; his thumb hooked in a heavy gold chain. His button-like blue eyes were cold and distant as he looked across the desk at the dusty cowboy.

Brett Malone whirled his hat in his hands. "I reckon I can't bring Jack back, mayor. But I'd sure like to know about his mine."

Mayor Pardee cleared his throat heavily. "Your brother's death is regrettable, Malone. I'm glad you're taking the attitude that you have no quarrel with the other party in the gun duel. Those things happen, I'm sorry to say. As for the mine, I understand Cass Oaker has a bill of sale. If you like, I'll send you to the city's legal counselor. He can tell you how things stand."

"I'd like that fine," Brett said.

Pardee picked up a pen and scribbled a note. He folded it and handed the sheet to Brett. "You'll find Quaid helpful if you give him this. I'm glad to have met you, Malone, and I hope your stay in Del Norte will be pleasant."

"I'm finding things kinda hot here," Brett grinned, "but I figure on hanging around a little."

He left the mayor's office in the rambling adobe building and walked down the long hall toward the entrance. A scarred-faced man wearing a star gave him a sharp, quick look and then went into the mayor's office. Brett continued outside and stopped in the brilliant sunshine.

The night spent at Norton's had rested him. His first trip this morning had been to the city hall and he knew that he had been followed by a dark, evil-eyed hombre who had slouched along several yards behind him. Brett couldn't see him now, nor did the man show up as he cut across the square and entered a frame business building. He mounted a flight of hollow wooden stairs to an office on the second floor.

Eldon Quaid was tall, thin, and looked as if he had stomach trouble. He gave Brett a sour, questioning look that disappeared after he read the mayor's note. He steepled his long fingers and sighed.

"You haven't a legal claim of any sort on the Jack Boy mine, Malone. The sale was legally made, duly recorded in Mexico. A copy of the bill of sale, with signatures duly witnessed is recorded here by Mr. Oaker as an extra precaution."

Brett chuckled mirthlessly. "Well, I reckon Jack knew what he was doing. I ain't one to kick. What's the chance of a chuck-line rider landing a job in these parts?"

Quaid's thin brows rose over his deep set eyes. He scratched his lantern jaw with a crooked forefinger, and his glance dropped to Brett's gun.

"I understand you can use that six pretty good."

"Fair," Brett admitted. "There was three gents made a mistake about me yesterday. Took me for a damn lawman and pulled irons before I could read my brand. I'm sorry it happened, but there it is."

Quaid nodded bleakly. "Regrettable," he sighed. "Have you ever done gun work?"

Brett looked up quickly and studied the rocky, gaunt face of the lawyer. He read nothing in the blank, dark eyes, or in the harsh pinch of the lips.

"Some," he admitted. "There was range trouble in Wyoming and I had my share in it."

Quaid kept his hands steepled and brought the tips of them under his jutting chin. A fly droned loudly as he silently studied the freckled cowboy before him. He suddenly swung around to his desk.

"You might be all right, Malone. See Frank Randall at the Broken Arrow. It's east of town, first road after you hit the bend in the river.

Tell him I sent you. Tell him you've ridden six hundred miles for a good job."

Brett's eyes widened. "But I ain't."

"You tell him anyway," Quaid said and smiled. It made his face seem uglier than ever. "Randall will believe you."

AFTER Brett had thanked the attorney, he left the building and stood on the plank sidewalk, rolling a quirly, his eyes narrowed. Six hundred miles—there was no reason to say anything like that. Abruptly his nimble fingers stopped and tobacco spilled from the paper tube. Six hundred miles—six. He looked quickly back up the stairs and then away again. *Six*. Could that be some sort of sign between the unknown members of The Six?

Was Quaid one of them—and the rancher, Randall? Brett felt a jerk of excitement in his muscles. He wanted to see Norton. Then caution intervened. He shouldn't be seen talking to the little lawman. So far Norton was unknown as a marshal by The Six, but there was no way to know when they would discover his identity.

Brett's jaw tightened and a muscle jumped in his cheek. He had learned from Norton that undoubtedly The Six were behind his brother's murder. The mine claim had promised to be a rich one, enough to interest the unknown renegades. Cass Oaker was one of their lieutenants. The actual gunman who downed Jack might never be known, but Brett had a chance to get at the men who had ordered the killing. It looked now as if a path had been opened for him.

It would be a dangerous and devious trail, but Brett felt a fierce surge of exultation. Sooner or later Malone bullets would avenge the murder of a Malone. He threw away tobacco and paper and strode swiftly to the livery stable.

He asked the way to the Broken Arrow from the snaggle-toothed hostler. The dirty giant gave him a squinting stare and then grinned.

"Have you run the Rio yet?" he asked. Brett looked blank and the man flushed. He quickly gave directions to the ranch and walked away as though he feared further questioning. Brett would remember that question. The correct answer he guessed would mark a man as a member of the renegade band.

His thoughts turned bleak and hard as he rode out of Del Norte. It seemed that every man he met had some connection with the secret band of evil. The Six must have built up a regular spider's web of spies and killers. They had their eyes and ears on everything that happened in the district. To break their power and bring them to a six-gun or hangnoose justice would be a man-sized job.

He reached the Broken Arrow road and turned down a trail that led toward a series of low, sear hills, brown and forbidding in the late afternoon sun. The river lay behind his back now and Mexico just beyond. He began to see owlhoot possibilities in the Broken Arrow spread.

The trail led winding through the hills, then turned sharply and dropped down into a valley, long and narrow. At the far end, close to the river, stood the adobe walls of the ranch. It looked well kept and prosperous as Brett came closer.

Two men came riding out toward him while he was yet some distance away. Brett rode calmly on, but his eyes narrowed and his hand dropped close to his holster. The riders spurred fast, then parted as they came closer so that they rode up on either side. Their faces were hard and their eyes wary. They carried the mark of the gunman in their glittering eyes, in the flat, harsh planes of their faces.

"What's your business, pilgrim?" one called. A white, livid scar pulled up one side of his mouth.

"You Randall?" Brett asked.

"I ain't, but you still got to read your tally to me."

Brett flushed at the man's arrogant tone, but he swallowed his anger. The second rider stood his mount far to one side, and his hand openly hovered over the handle of his six.

"I been sent out to see Randall," Brett said. "A gent from Del Norte sent me."

"Have you run the Rio yet?" the man with the scar asked sharply.

Brett shook his head. "I don't savvy that, Mister. Let me see Randall."

The man's gun blurred up and lined down. His voice rasped with suspicion. "Shuck his hardware, Dog. I got him plumb centered."

The second rider came closer and reached out. His hand snaked Brett's gun clear of the holster. "His fangs is pulled, Twist."

"Ride ahead," Twist ordered. "I reckon now you can say your piece to Randall."

BRETT touched his mount and rode slowly between the two men. They fell in behind him. The silence was ominous, and Brett could fairly feel the suspicion in the air. He rode into the Broken Arrow yard through a sturdy gate in a well-kept fence. A big man stood in the open door of the ranch house. Twist ordered Brett to ride toward him.

"What you got here?" the man inquired. He was a mountain of a man, and all of it bone and muscle. His lower jaw looked as if it had been carved from granite. His lips were full, yet harshly pulled down at the corners. His nose was a beak that separated two coal-black, gleaming eyes.

"Are you Randall?" Brett asked before Twist could reply.

"That's me," the man burred.

"I'm looking for a job," Brett said. "I'm pretty handy with a gun."

Randall looked Brett over from battered hat to cracked boots. He shook his head. "You're riding the wrong trail, hombre. The Broken Arrow don't need any hands—particularly gunhands."

Brett looked disappointed. "Then I've rid for nothing. Quaid said you'd hire me."

"Quaid?" Randall's eyes narrowed. "How far have you ridden to get this job?"

Brett remembered Quaid's instructions. "Six hundred miles, as I reckon it."

Randall grinned and Twist shrugged. Dog silently extended Brett's gun to him and dismounted. With no further comment Dog led his horse toward the near-by corral as if he knew there'd be nothing else required of him.

"I can put you on the pay roll," Randall said. "Put your gear in the bunkhouse. Some of the boys will take you across the Rio tonight."

Brett nodded his thanks and lifted the reins, heading the horse for the corral. After he had unsaddled, he carried his bedroll toward the bunkhouse. Dog lolled in the doorway, whittling on a stick. He looked up under his brows at Brett.

"Heard about your scrap t'other night," he commented. "Heard you downed a couple of the boys."

"That's right." Brett halted, dropped his bedroll. Dog shrugged.

"Might be I'll see how fast you are someday."

"No time like now," Brett stated flatly.

Dog shook his head and snapped the knife blade closed. "Not now. You're new, but one thing you'll learn fast. There ain't no gunplay less'n the boss or one of his pards says so. Later, huh?"

Brett picked up the bedroll and shoved by the gunhawk. Dog watched him, half turning around in the door. Then he started whistling in an off key and sauntered away.

The crew of the Broken Arrow was a tough lot. Brett had his first glimpse of them in the cookshack. It looked as if Randall had gathered his hellions from all the devil's holes in the West. The meal was like eating with a pack of lobo wolves who might go mad at

any moment. Brett was glad when he had finished it.

He stepped outside and rolled a quirly. The rest of the men hunkered down close by. A lone rider came streaking in from the direction of Del Norte, dismounted before the ranch house and disappeared inside. A few minutes later Randall came striding out, a pleased smile on his big face. The men became alert.

"Get ready to ride, boys," Randall boomed. "Your word for tonight is 'Snake.' We're hitting Pablo Mireles' spread."

The men broke up, but Randall called them back. His smile grew broader. "We got us another lawman in Del Norte today. He was a jasper with a gold marshal's badge. Norton was the name."

Brett felt the shock of the news through his whole body. He struggled to keep his face blank.

CHAPTER III

MALONE had little time to think. He saddled with the rest of the crew and then waited until Randall came back from the big house. The rancher wore crossed gunbelts and his hat brim was pulled low over his hard eyes.

"Some of Miron's *vaqueros* will be over there, so don't forget the word. You might be salivated if you don't sing it out. Same goes when you run into a jasper in the dark. Let's ride."

He swung aboard a magnificent bay and led the way out of the ranch yard. The sun was already low behind the western line of hills, and purple shadows crept out across the sear, rolling plains that gently dipped to the river. Dog rode behind Brett. To one side of Brett was a tough-faced button with a weak chin and loose lips. The boy rode thoughtfully, and Brett caught some of his fearful glances at his companions.

No word was spoken. There was only the soft slur of the horses' hoofs in the sand, the creak of saddle leather, the occasional sound of a horse chewing on the bit. The boy beside Brett started edging away as the shadows lengthened and the night descended.

They struck the river at full dark. It was only a lighter sheen in the dark that pressed in close around the men. Brett could no longer see the youth who had pulled still further away. A sudden, muffled shout sounded off to the right. Instantly the cavalcade halted. Brett heard a threshing sound and then a splash as bodies hit the water. A muffled gunshot sounded and a man screamed. It choked off in a horrible, gurgling sound. Randall came riding back.

"What's going on here?"

Dog appeared dripping, holding a Colt in his hand. "The kid got cold feet. He tried to slip away."

Randall grunted. "Did he?"

"Nope," Dog grinned. "He ain't going nowhere no more."

"Good," Randall snapped, and spurred back to the head of the line. Dog mounted again and came up beside Brett as the company splashed through the river to the Mexican side.

"That lawman got the kid nervous," Dog chuckled. "He got his loop all tangled."

"You act mighty fast," Brett said coldly.

Dog laughed again. "You get used to it, hombre, after you've carried the sign of The Six around for a spell. There ain't never any backing out of this remuda."

No further incident broke the monotony of the ride through the dark shrouded countryside. Low hills were only humped, blurred shadows against the starry sky. Brett caught faint pinpoints of light now and then, but Randall kept them at a distance. Though there had been no change in the brooding land they rode through, Brett abruptly sensed the sudden tenseness that came over the riders.

There was a short stop, a few low queries somewhere up ahead and then the band rode on, more slowly this

time. Twist appeared suddenly close to Brett and called softly to Dog.

"You'n' me keep our eyes on the new jasper," Twist said. His voice hardened as he spoke directly to Brett. "You'll be dead or a member of The Six when this is over, hombre."

Dog's soft, malevolent whisper sounded from the other side. "He's not spinning a windy, either. Last notch he got was a jasper who owned a mine that Cass Oaker bought."

BRETT jumped and was glad that the darkness covered him. He felt a sudden rush of mad hate and he had to fight himself to keep from gunning his brother's killer down then and there. His hands gripped the saddle horn and he bit his lower lip until he felt the blood ooze out.

Up ahead a loud shout sounded. Guns blasted. The whole band set spurs and swept down a steep descent. Brett had a glimpse of slashing gunfire in the night, heard the frightened bawling of cattle. Then he cut to the left as the band spread out. Tonight Brett Malone rode as a rustler, and beside him rode a man who had shed Malone blood. Brett's mind worked with lightning speed.

He stuck close to Twist as the rustlers spread out and thundered down on the herd. Gunfire doubled as the *vaqueros* vainly tried to protect their beeves. Brett drew his own six and fired ahead, careful to place his shots well above the gun flashes so that no one would be hurt.

For a time it seemed that the rustlers would be beaten off. The *vaqueros* sent a withering fire into them. Saddles emptied, the rustlers faltered in their charge, then started to scatter. Dog disappeared somewhere into the night.

Brett instantly spurred toward Twist, pulled up beside him. He yelled over the gunfire. "My name's Malone. Does that mean anything to you?"

Twist turned instantly and his gun swept up. Brett fired, and the jump of the gun in his fist made his eyes gleam in the darkness. Twist stiffened, came up in his stirrups. His six fired uselessly into the ground. The renegade tumbled from the saddle.

A deeper burst of gunfire from beyond the herd brought Brett around. Randall's deep bellow urged his men on. "That's Miron! We got 'em now."

Instantly the rustlers swept down to place a deadly circle around the defenders. The *vaqueros* broke, streaming out across the plain in a hundred directions. Brett spurred forward with the rest, yelling and firing his six, still careful to keep his shots high. Dog came in from one side.

The battle was over. With quick efficiency Randall snapped orders, and his men started driving cattle back toward the river. They would probably be hurried to the Broken Arrow, the brands changed with running irons, and then sold in American markets. The Six played both sides of the river, showing no preference.

"Where's Twist?" Dog asked suddenly.

"He faded awhile back," Brett answered. "I was too busy snapping lead to notice."

Dog grunted. "He'll show up, I reckon. I got pulled away myself." He rode silently for a moment and then turned in the saddle. "You're one of us now, I reckon. Randall will give you the sign when we get back."

WORKING steadily, the renegade crew herded the cattle across the river to the American side. Brett Malone, on Randall's orders, went with the larger group to the bunkhouse. A smaller group herded the wet cows on to an unknown bedding ground. Dog still worried about Twist and eyed Brett suspiciously back at the bunkhouse.

"He should be here," Dog stated flatly. "He's run into trouble."

"There was a heap of shooting," Brett suggested.

Dog scowled. "Yeah, there was. Funny thing he didn't ride herd on you, though."

Brett yawned and stretched out in the bunk. "You got strayed yourself."

Dog grunted and undressed. The lamps were blown out and darkness descended on the big room. But the men were still too keyed up with excitement to sleep. Cigarettes glowed and faded as men smoked. Brett heard of lawless deeds done all over the Southwest as the men talked. Gradually snores took the place of the conversation and at last Brett himself drifted off.

The cheery clang of the steel triangle before the cookshack brought the men tumbling out of their bunks. Brett sat up, jammed his hat on his head, and then dressed. He stepped outside and Randall was waiting. The giant rancher called to Brett and led him to the ranch house.

Randall said nothing until he led Brett to the big living room. It was richly furnished, immense. At one end was a big fireplace. Fine rugs were on the floor; Indian blankets were exhibited on the walls. Brett noted the narrow windows in the thick adobe. This house could be a fort if necessity arose.

The big rancher motioned Brett to a chair and sat down himself. He acted pleased with himself and his harsh face was almost pleasant.

"We did a nice business last night," he started, "and I reckon you came up to taw. Quaid don't often make a mistake in judging men, though he is a cantankerous old scarecrow. Brett, I reckon I can give you this."

He picked up a metal disk and extended it to Brett. The cowboy saw that it carried the six on one side and the rattler on the other. He examined it curiously and looked questioningly up at Randall. The big rancher became serious and there was a hint of steel in his voice.

"You carry that, Brett. It marks you as one of us. You'd be surprised how many members of The Six is in this country. Might be someone'll ask if you've run the Rio yet. You answer you have, six miles down. Got that?"

Brett nodded, and chuckled. "Sounds like a secret society."

"Hombre, it is. It ain't easy to get in and it's a heap harder to get out. You've been on a raid with us, a heap o' fellers know that. Don't try to pull a double-cross; don't let your tongue flap. You saw what happened to that kid last night when he got cold feet."

Brett scratched his head. "I ain't one to turn down an easy dollar when I can make it. I ain't one to ask how it's to be made. But I've had an itchy heel all my life."

RANDALL'S fist smashed on the chair arm. "You ain't wandering no more or less'n The Six tells you, and we ain't likely. You take orders and do your share. You'll get plenty of dinero and there ain't a lawman in the country who'll touch you. We see to that."

"That listens like an easy trail to me," Brett grinned.

"It is," Randall nodded. "You can grab your breakfast now, and then I want you to ride to Del Norte. Look up Cass Oaker in the Rio Saloon and show him that sign I gave you. He'll fix things up with the sheriff for you. Be back here tomorrow."

Brett arose and placed the brass tag in his pocket. He grinned at Randall and then left the house. He found a place in the crowded tables of the cookshack and hungrily gulped a heavy breakfast. Afterwards, he started toward the corral.

Dog was waiting at the gate. "Twist ain't back, and there's three others missing."

Brett whistled. "Them Mexes put up a scrap."

"They did," Dog agreed, "but I wonder if it was that heavy. Twist was my partner and I sure hate to see him go. If I thought he was back-shot, I'd go on the prod."

Brett turned, eyes hard. "You've hinted at that before, Dog. If you think I killed your partner, pull your iron. We'll settle it here and now."

"I'll wait," Dog answered. "Could

be I'm wrong. Besides, this ain't the time or place."

He pushed away from the gate, flipped his cigarette at Brett's feet, and walked away. Brett watched him a moment, then saddled up and rode out of the corral. He headed toward town and passed the rancho guards about a mile out. They waved to him and then paid no more attention.

Brett thought with satisfaction of Twist's killing. The murderer had deserved the death he had met. But Brett knew that his own task was not finished. Twist had only been an instrument who had obeyed the orders of a brain higher up. That unknown man, probably one of The Six was Jim's real killer. Brett wanted his scalp and intended to get it.

He wondered what he would do now that Norton was killed. The local law could not be trusted and Brett did not know how to contact the men who wore the gold badge of the U. S. Marshals. He was in this mess, in it up to his neck. He'd play the string out no matter how the cards fell. Someone would be surely sent to replace Art Norton and, with luck, maybe Brett could contact the man.

He came out on the main road to Del Norte. A rider came toward him from the town. Brett became alert but didn't slacken the pace of his mount. The rider came closer and Brett's eyes widened in amazement. From a distance, the man was his double.

"Hey!" he yelled. "I want to—"

The stranger went into instant action. His hand stabbed down toward his gun and the six streaked up. Brett threw himself wildly to one side as the gun belched flame and smoke.

CHAPTER IV

THE slug whined close to his head. Brett threw up his hands and the stranger held his fire. He kept his six levelled as he rode up. Closer, Brett saw that there were many differences in them. His face did not have Brett's harsh angles; the lips were just a trifle thicker; the mouth not quite so wide. But the rest would match—size, weight, hair and eyes.

Brett grinned. "You're mighty prody, marshal."

The stranger's eyes narrowed and his voice carried a heavy load of suspicion. "Who are you?"

"Brett Malone. I was working with Norton. You're the jasper who was to come down here in the first place."

The man's grim lips broke in a smile and he holstered his gun. The smile vanished and he looked grim and angry. "Norton told me about you just before he died. They caught him flat and gunned him without a chance to fight back."

"It's their way," Brett nodded. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder. "Let's hole up where we can talk and not be seen. I've got plenty to report."

"Over beyond those rocks," the stranger suggested, and the two men rode off the trail. They hunkered down in the shadow of the rocks.

"I'm Gard Stevens," the stranger introduced himself. "I finished my case and was sent down here to relieve Art Norton. It was to have been my job in the first place. I reckon I got here too late."

Brett liked Stevens, the direct, frank eyes, the incisive clip of his voice as he spoke. Judging from the speed of his draw, he could handle a hogleg with the best of them.

"I got a lot to say and there ain't much time," Brett said.

He told of his adventures after leaving Norton, how they had led to the Broken Arrow, the raid into Mexico, and the partial avenging of his brother's death. Gard listened quietly, nodding now and then. Brett finished and the two men remained silent for a time.

Gard rolled a quirly. "You've got on the inside track, amigo. Art didn't make a mistake in you."

Brett leaned forward. "More'n that, Stevens. Randall let something mighty important slip when he talked

to me this morning. He was talking about The Six and he said 'we'. That's stuck in my craw. Pardee, the mayor, sent me to Quaid. The jury-talker sends me to Randall and I get hired. Here's what Randall handed me."

He produced the metal tag and Gard Stevens examined it closely. He looked up sharply. "You think Randall's one of The Six?"

"Sure, and so's Pardee and Quaid. It figures right out. There's three more of them somewhere."

Gard rubbed his chin reflectively. "You're right, Malone. But how are we going to uncover them?"

"Maybe this Cass Oaker will give me a lead," Brett said thoughtfully. His voice tightened. "Friend, you stay under cover. The Six has a good description of you and they tried to cut me down because you and me look alike. I don't know how you've escaped so far, and I don't want to lose me another marshal."

Gard laughed but shook his head. "We don't work that way, Malone."

"This is once you do it another way." Brett leaned forward. "If you wander around, you ain't going to help me a bit when I've got the brands on The Six. You'll be in boot hill. Something else, I'm the one on the inside. You play my way for the time being or you won't get any information at all from me."

Gard stared levelly at Brett, his face clouded. Then slowly the anger left and he chuckled. "I reckon you got me on the business end of a lass rope, Malone. Where do I hole up?"

"You stay out of Del Norte until tonight. Then slip in and go to that place Norton had. When I'm ready, I'll be around."

Gard arose. "All right, Malone. Good luck and bring in their scalps."

He shook hands with Brett who mounted again. He waved at Stevens and rode at a swift canter back to the trail. He set a fast pace toward Del Norte and it wasn't long before he rode down the main street and pulled up before the Rio Saloon.

THIS early of a morning, business was scant. A bare half dozen men stood at the long bar; the game tables were empty; the piano stood in murky loneliness on the little stage at one end of the room. A mustachioed, red-faced barkeep took Brett's order. Then Brett asked for Cass Oaker.

"He ain't around," the man grunted. He whirled a shot glass toward Brett and then leaned closer as he poured the liquor. "Have you run the Rio yet?" he asked in a low tone.

"Sure, about six miles down," Brett answered instantly.

The barkeep winked and smiled. "I'll see about Cass." He left the bar, signalling another man to take care of his customers. He was gone but a short time and then returned. He pointed up a flight of stairs at the far end of the room. "Second door," he grunted.

Brett finished his drink, hitched up his gun belt, and mounted the stairs. He pushed the door open onto a sunny office, spacious and richly furnished. A man sat behind a desk—a man with a long dark face and piercing black eyes. A line of thin black mustache lay beneath the long nose. His smile was oily, and the long soft fingers on the desk top constantly tapped noiselessly on the wood.

"Randall sent me," Brett said and produced the metal tab. Cass Oaker gave it only a flicking glance. His black eyes bored into Brett's face.

"Have you ever run the Rio?"

Brett gave the required answer and Cass Oaker visibly relaxed. He picked up the metal tab and played with it in his fingers. "I'll take you over to see Sheriff Tedlow. He's one of ours. You're new in The Six. You're always welcome here at the Rio. I like to see the boys."

"Thanks," Brett answered shortly and stood waiting.

"What's your handle?" Oaker asked.

"Malone," Brett replied, "Brett Malone."

Oaker's dark eyes snapped up and

his thin lips tightened. "Malone? There was another Malone down here. He owned a mine. We had to take it."

"Yes, I know," Brett answered slowly. "He was my brother."

Oaker's eyes narrowed to mere pinpoints. "How did you get in The Six? Did one of the boys eat loco weed?"

Brett smiled thinly. "I don't know about that. But here I am. Pardee sent me to Quaid, Quaid to Randall, and now Randall to you. You tell me about the sheriff."

Cass had dropped the metal tab. He stared fixedly at Brett, still as stone. His eyes were malevolent. "Pardee's old and slipping. He makes mistakes."

"A bad one this time, Oaker. I know the names of five of The Six. I carry the sign of the band and I know its passwords. The Six killed my brother. Last night I shot Twist. What else do you think will happen?"

Oaker didn't move, but his lips broke back in a wide grin. "Nothing. You've talked yourself right into boot hill. You won't get out of the Rio Saloon alive."

Brett chuckled. "I'll gamble on that, Oaker. I was going to string along with you hombres for a while, get some more information. But I reckon you're too suspicious. You might set your gunhawks on me and tip your five partners. I reckon I'd better put you where you'll be safe."

OAKER moved then. His arm flashed up to his dark coat and his fingers touched the hide-out gun. There they froze. He stared directly into the dark muzzle of Brett's Colt. Slowly his hand dropped from his coat onto the desk, while Brett took the deadly derringer from its holster.

"Oaker, you're walking out of this place with me. We're going to be friends, savvy. We're going to see the crooked lawman."

"You can't get away with it," Oaker choked.

"I'm pocketed, Oaker," Brett said slowly. "It don't make a bit of difference whether I die downstairs or up here. The way you read it, I'll die anyway. So, we're walking. One sign from you, one wrong word and you'll get a slug right in your spine. Savvy?"

Cass stared at him, then slowly nodded. Brett stepped back, the derringer in his hand. He dropped his own iron in its holster, then placed his hat over the hand holding the hide-out gun.

"Let's take a pasear, Cass. I'll tell you which way to go when we're out of the saloon."

Cass arose and adjusted his long black coat. He picked up his hat and jammed it angrily on his head. He glared at Brett who grinned back and jerked his head toward the door. Cass crossed the room in long strides, Brett close behind him. Together they descended the stairs.

The few customers at the bar paid little attention to them. One of the bartenders looked up and Brett's nerves tightened. Cass Oaker paused and deliberately lit a cigar. Brett let him feel the pressure of the gun muzzle a moment.

"I'll be over at the sheriff's office," Cass said and the bartender nodded.

They descended the remainder of the stairs and crossed the wide room. At last they passed through the swing doors and Brett breathed a little easier. He ordered Cass to turn left toward the town hall. They skirted one side of the city square and then plunged into a narrow street that led westward.

Brett had hidden the derringer long since, depending on a fast Colt draw to handle any trouble that Cass might care to stir up. The black-coated man walked on silently, but his face was paper-white with anger and chagrin.

Just ahead Brett saw the adobe house that Norton had used. The door was closed, and Brett hoped it would be unlocked. He herded Cass ahead, tried the door. Stevens had locked it. Brett ordered Cass around the side of the house. Only blank thick walls met

his eyes, but up above toward the flat roof were projecting timbers.

Brett pulled his gun and hit Cass on the back of the head. The man crumpled. Instantly Brett wheeled out to the street, saw a horse standing at a near-by rack. His eyes lighted at the coiled rope on the saddle. It took only a moment to slip the rope free. Then he returned to the side of his unconscious prisoner. He opened the loop, threw it over one of the high timbers, made it fast. Using his legs against the wall, he went up the rope hand over hand.

Brett crouched on the wall a moment then scurried across the flat roof to the edge of the patio. It was deserted. He swung down from a timber, hung a moment, and then let go. He landed with a thud and quickly recovered himself. In a short time, he was at the front door. He couldn't open it.

Brett swore softly and streaked to the rear, across the patio and a big, cool kitchen. The door there was held by a wooden bar that he quickly drew. He cut around the corner of the house intending to get his prisoner before the man recovered consciousness.

He pulled up short. A man bent over Cass Oaker. He looked up as Brett rounded the corner. Dog's sullen face broke in a wide smile, and he came slowly to his feet, his fingers taloned out over his gun.

"Well, if it ain't the sudden pilgrim. You've sure been busy venting brands this morning, hombre. Now I'll burn one of my own."

His hand dropped with blurring speed to his holster.

CHAPTER V

BRETT slid into a half-crouch, and his own fingers stabbed down, hooked around the walnut handle, and jerked the Colt free. Both shots sounded as one, deafening in the narrow space. Dog's lead whined by Brett's ear and was lost down the passageway. The outlaw stared dumbly at Brett. A red stain spread across his shirt front. He lifted his hand, his fingers probing at his chest. His eyes filmed and he stood, swaying slowly. He took a blundering step forward. His gun spilled from his slackening fingers and his lips moved.

"Fast," he choked. "Too—fast."

A spasm of pain crossed his face and he crumpled down like a toy of many joints. His muscles quivered a moment and then he lay still. Brett heard shouts from the street.

He quickly holstered his gun and bent over Cass Oaker. He worked the limp body to his shoulders, staggered up. He went at a stumbling run back around the corner and into the open door. He dumped the body unceremoniously to the floor, turned and shot the bolt.

Brett listened. He heard running steps outside. Someone swore and there followed the excited drone of voices. There was a great deal of movement for a long time, and then gradually all sound faded. Brett straightened and a relieved sigh welled out of his throat.

Cass Oaker stirred and Brett turned. The man opened his eyes and stared around him, puzzled. Understanding came, and the man sat up abruptly. He saw Brett.

"Where am I?"

"I brought you to a new corral, friend Oaker. We're waiting for a gent who wears a gold government badge."

Cass came to his feet, brushed the dust off his clothing. His dark eyes flashed and he grinned sardonically at Brett. "I think some of my friends will miss me. They'll come looking."

"I've marked a blind trail, amigo, and you'll be hard to find. We'll go to the patio and make ourselves comfortable until my friend gets back."

He jerked his thumb toward the door. Oaker sniffed disdainfully and walked into the patio. The two men, prisoner and captor, sat down to wait.

The hours seemed to pass slowly. Brett said nothing to Cass, gave no

hint of what might come. The saloon owner maintained a calm assurance for the first couple of hours. Then the continued silence began to crack him as questioning and threats never would.

Brett noticed the way the long fingers began to drum nervously on the chair arm. He crossed and re-crossed his long legs, pulled at his mustache. Brett lolled back easily in his chair, but his Colt could jump into instant use. Cass seemed to realize it.

The sun went down, and now Oaker paced back and forth in a limited space. Brett did not try to stop him, only kept a wary eye that Oaker did not get too close to a door to make a break. Twilight seeped into the patio, and Brett forced Cass into the kitchen, where they found a lamp. The gaunt saloon man lit it and carried it into the patio on Brett's orders. They sat down to wait again. Darkness deepened.

"Do you think you can make me talk?" Cass asked defiantly.

"When the time comes," Brett drawled easily. "Me and my friend, we got ways of making stubborn hombres open up like a sky-pilot at a camp meeting."

"Not me!" Cass laughed shortly.

"You're pretty certain, seems like. By the way, I ain't seen hide nor hair of your friends."

"They'll come," Cass said, but there was just a faint note of uncertainty in his voice.

BOTH of them heard the sound. The bolts of the front door were thrown back. Brett's Colt snaked out, and he covered Cass. He slipped out of the chair, tense and waiting. In a moment Gard Stevens came into the patio, halted abruptly at the sight of the two men.

"You got company, Stevens," Brett spoke. "Meet one of The Six."

Stevens' face showed his surprise. Then he shook his head. "You're off the trail. Oaker is only one of the lieutenants."

Brett chuckled. "They had you fooled and Norton, too. Both of you looked for something that wasn't there. Cass Oaker, Dan Pardee, Eldon Quaid, Frank Randall, Sheriff Tedlow and a breed bandit, Miron, below the border are The Six. Each posed as a lieutenant to send you chasing down shadows. There wasn't anyone above them."

"You'll have to prove it," Gard stated.

Brett nodded. "Keep your eyes on this jasper a minute." He returned his Colt to the holster, unbuckled the gun-belt and passed it over to Gard. He faced Cass.

"You stole my brother's mine. Twist shot him and I've sent Twist to boot hill. Maybe you ordered Jack's death. I'm guessing that you did. Anyhow, you're the only one of The Six I got to work on."

Cass licked his lips. "You can't prove anything."

"No," Brett agreed slowly, "but I can guess. I'm blaming you unless you tell me different, and talk straight and hard. Cass Oaker, you're on your way to your grave. You'll land there all broken up unless you prove you didn't order my brother's death."

He advanced, big fists doubled. In the lamplight, his eyes looked hard and brittle. Cass Oaker blanched, slowly retreated. He had never before faced bone-crushing fists, ripping knuckles, hard muscles that could beat the life from him. It showed in his eyes, it showed in the way the confidence fled from his face leaving stark fear mirrored there.

Brett moved with the speed of a striking snake and his fist crashed into the thin face. Cass Oaker smashed backward, arms wildly flailing. He stumbled into a chair, went down. Brett jumped after him. His strong fingers sank in Cass's shirt front, and his fist crashed into the cruel mouth.

"Talk," he growled. "Talk fast. You killed my brother."

Cass sobbed through a bloody mouth and pulled himself from the

floor. He tried to scuttle away, but Brett pounced on him, yanked him to his feet. Cass tried a feeble punch but Brett's fist smashed him down again. He stepped forward, punishing fists ready to slash and smash again.

"Stop!" Cass Oaker moaned. "I didn't order Malone shot! I didn't! That was Quaid's idea."

Brett halted, shot a quick, triumphant glance at Gard Stevens. The marshal leaned forward, face intent and eager. "Quaid's one of The Six? So are you?"

"Yes," Cass Oaker groaned. "He called the cards. He read the signs right." He pointed to Brett. "We've ramrodded Del Norte that way for two years. Quaid's the real brains."

Brett jerked the man to his feet. "Who got the illegal dinero?"

"We pooled it after paying our gunhands. We divided it each six months. Tonight we were to split again. I'm supposed to be there."

BRETT looked at Gard Stevens. The lawman's face showed excitement, and triumph gleamed in his eyes. He stepped to Cass Oaker. "Where are they meeting?" he asked, his eyes alive with interest.

"I—I don't dare tell you." Cass flinched.

Brett's fist doubled, and he deliberately pushed Gard to one side. His face was set and stern. Cass Oaker backed away, his hands outstretched as though to push Brett from him. His voice held a whine and all the assurance had long since left him.

"I can't tell you. They'll kill me. They've got too many gunhands. I know."

Brett spoke distinctly. "They might salivate you. But you can place your chips on one sure thing. Maybe they'll kill you if I don't in the next ten minutes."

Gard spoke swiftly. "Give us the list of gunmen. You know them. Give us the names and we'll pick them up."

Brett's long arms reached for Cass and he babbled, "I'll tell. Don't hit me. They're meeting at Dan Pardee's house. Nine o'clock."

Gard glanced swiftly at his watch. "Nine! It's almost that time now."

"I'll hogtie this jasper so he'll be safe," Brett said.

He left the room and returned shortly with a coil of rope. He forced Cass into a chair and then proceeded to expertly rope him to it. When he had finished, Cass Oaker would not be able to move until Gard or Brett released him.

The deputy marshal grinned at Brett. "That does it. Cowboy, you've done a swell job. I got an idea the government and the department will have a place for a man like you."

"The job ain't done," Brett answered shortly. "Besides, I ain't one to wear a law badge."

"You're not wearing a badge, but you've been a mighty good example of a lawman at work the last few days."

Brett laughed and scratched his head. "I reckon you've tallied that one. But let's corral us some more renegades over at the good mayor's place. Then we can jaw and auger all we please."

They checked their guns and loads, and slipped out of the house. Brett cautiously scouted the dark street before he would let Gard out the door. The way seemed to be clear, and the two men cat-footed through the shadows of the night toward the north end of the town.

They arrived, by devious and careful turnings, at the mayor's home. They stopped. No lights showed. Gard Stevens grunted in surprise and disgust.

"I wonder if that crooked ranny sent us off on a wrong trail."

"Don't think so," Brett whispered. "Oaker named the cards straight from ace to deuce. He was too scared. Look over there by the stable."

Then Gard saw the dark shadows of three horses. They stood with drooping heads. He nodded and pulled his six. Brett stopped him.

"Wait until I lead off them cayuses.

We don't want any of our friends to ride off right sudden, do we?"

"Go to it," Gard chuckled. "I'll wait here for you."

Brett slipped off. He worked around the stable, alert for any guard the ringleaders of the deadly band of The Six might have placed. There was none, and Brett thought that the men were pretty confident in their power and their ability to keep their identity a secret. He reached the horses and grabbed the nostrils of one as it snorted. Soft words calmed the rest of them, and Brett gathered up the reins. He led them away, across two streets, and hitched them to a post before a dark house. He quickly returned to Gard Stevens.

The marshal asked no questions, but started ahead toward the dark house. They eased through the fence gate and skirted the walk to the wide, dark veranda. Even here there was no guard. Close to the house, Brett nudged Gard.

"That window over there. See the crack of light?"

Gard nodded. They mounted the steps to the porch and eased to the door. Brett carefully tried the knob. It turned slowly under his fingers. A slight pressure of his knee and it swung open. Ahead of them was a dark entry way. To their right, from under a door, a beam of light escaped.

THEY pulled their guns and tiptoed to the door. Gard was just behind Brett. Voices sounded clearly, and Brett instantly recognized Quaid's precise tone. He also thought a few of the other voices were familiar.

"Cass must be delayed. Can't we go on?"

Pardee rumbled deeply, "I don't see why not. Randall, you got rid of them cows?"

"Tomorrow. We drive 'em to Pinol and the buyer, Zachary, will take 'em right off our hands. Like before, there won't be any questions."

An oily voice broke in. "That ees for the next time, no? How about the pesos what we divide now?"

"In a minute, Miron. Tedlow, how about that new government lawman?"

"He disappeared today," a rasping voice snarled. "I ain't seen him. I figure he's the one that downed Dog. Some of our boys heard the shots but no one seen the coyote that got him."

Pardee cleared his throat. "Gents, we got this new lawman to plant in boot hill. That's your job, Tedlow. In the meantime, we have thirty thousand dollars to divide. I've listed our expenses to Randall's gunnies and some of the boys we keep around town to take care of our interests. You'll find it all on this paper. You'll see what we've made on various deals, including the Malone mine evaluation."

Miron's voice cut in. "These talk she's no good. *Por diablo*, I jus' run the cow across the Rio. I don't read these marks. Let us have the pesos."

Quaid sounded satisfied. "That looks mighty nice, Dan. We couldn't do better."

Gard nudged Brett. "I want that paper. It's enough to jail any or all of them," he whispered.

Brett nodded. His fingers twined around the doorknob and silently turned it. He took a deep breath and his muscles tensed. With a single motion he pushed open the door, his gun levelled. Quaid's long form swiveled in startled surprise. He still held the sheet of paper in his hand. Gard's gun covered Randall, and the hard-faced rancher sat stone-still in his chair.

Quaid made a motion to tear the paper. Brett's gun shifted a trifle and roared. Quaid dropped the paper and clutched at his wrist. Miron swore in swift Spanish and faded back, clawing for his gun. Tedlow dropped to the floor, throwing himself out of the chair.

Gard's gun swung to cover him, and then Randall jumped into action. Brett swung to face Miron, reading him as the most dangerous snake in

the nest. The breed's gun was out, his swarthy pinched face writhing in killer lust.

Brett's slug caught him in the throat, and the breed bandit was driven back against the wall by the slap of the slug. Randall's shot caught Brett in the shoulder, spun him half around. Tedlow's lead missed, burying itself in the wall. Gard caught the sheriff squarely in the chest as Brett traded more lead with Randall.

Brett fired through a haze of pain, but he saw Randall go down, the man's six spewing slugs uselessly into the floor. He half turned, saw Quaid reaching for Miron's six. Brett shot it out from under his fingers and the lawyer jumped back as though a snake had struck at him.

Fat Dan Pardee sat behind his desk, his face slack in paralyzing fear. Gradually the smoke cleared, and the thunder of the guns left Brett's ears. Gard picked up the paper, glanced over it, and smiled grimly at Pardee.

"This ends your term in office, mayor, and it starts your term in a federal prison. It'll be a long term, too."

Quaid snarled from the corner, "Don't say anything, Pardee. He's got a lot of proving to do."

Gard turned to the attorney. "Cass Oaker will be our star witness, to save his own worthless hide. You're going up for murder, or accessory thereto. We know who ordered Jack Malone's death—and why."

Quaid's face paled and he said nothing. Miron was dead, Tedlow was dying. Randall was badly wounded, but he'd live to face trial for his part in the reign of lawlessness that had held Del Norte and this stretch of the Rio Grande in its grip.

Gard turned to Brett. "Cowboy, we've hit the jackpot. I want to—" He broke off short. Brett Malone sat down heavily in a chair, clutching his shoulder where blood oozed through the shirt. The marshal slapped steel bracelets on his two prisoners. Then he worked quickly, ripping the shirt to get at Brett's wound. He breathed a sight of relief.

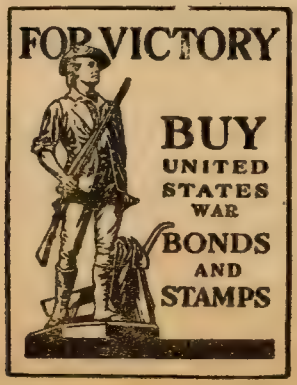
"Missed the bone, cowboy. You'll be fit as a fiddle before long."

Brett nodded. "I guess I've taken care of Jack, huh?"

Gard Stevens chuckled grimly. "You have, and my friend, Norton, too. Brett Malone, you're going with me to San Antone, after we clear this up, if I have to herd you there at the point of a six. You're going to wear a badge."

Brett scratched his jaw with his good hand. He grinned despite the pain. "It's sure a pretty gold brand, lawman. I just might ride your trail."

Gard raised his brows in a dubious look. "Gold badge, huh? Cowpoke, you'll find it takes lead to back it—and you're just the hombre to do it."



The Make-Believe Marshal

By Gunnison Steele

Sam Rhett, badge-toter of Gunsmoke Bend, didn't give a hoot in hell for the law. All he wanted was dinero, and he invented a surefire system for getting it. But a certain bank robber also knew a trick—a trick to show that two can play a double-dealing game.

SAM RHETT, marshal of Gunsmoke Bend, a tall, slab-bodied man with reddish hair, pursed his thin lips and read what he had just written. The letter was addressed to the sheriff of Rosillos County, a hundred miles to the south, and said in part:

From a letter found on this Johnny Cralle, he seems to have been your brother. As I

said, he was killed by me while resisting arrest after being caught in the act of robbing a bank. He has been buried here in Gunsmoke Bend. Please write or see me if you should care to make other disposition of the body.

Highly satisfied, Marshal Rhett sealed the letter, got up, crossed to the post office, and mailed it. Several men were in the post office. They spoke to him curtly; some avoided speaking at all. Rhett shrugged contemptuously; he didn't want their friendship or respect. He was paid to keep the peace, and no one could deny that he did a good job. Nor would anyone deny, least of all Rhett himself, that he was conscienceless as a rattler.

As he'd said in the letter, young Cralle had been killed while sticking up a bank. What he didn't explain was that he, Rhett, had tricked the youngster into trying to rob the bank. Then he'd killed Johnny Cralle, cold-bloodedly, to collect the five thousand dollar reward that the state of Texas had offered for dead bank robbers. It had been ridiculously easy, and it was a game that might be played over and over.

A week after mailing the letter, Sam Rhett received an answer from C. T. Cralle, sheriff of Rosillos County. The letter was almost curt:

As you say, Johnny Cralle was my brother, although I had not seen or heard from him for almost a year. He was unmanageable, and I am not surprised to hear that he was caught trying to rob a bank. His body will be left where it is, at least for the present.

More important, to me, is the fact that a prisoner escaped from my jail two days ago. His name is Caddo Thor, and he is wanted for murder. From reports, I think he is headed in your direction. I am enclosing a full-length picture of Caddo Thor, so he will be easily recognizable if seen. This man Thor is dangerous.

Marshal Rhett smiled with cold satisfaction. He'd halfway expected trouble with the unknown sheriff over the killing of Johnny Cralle. Luckily, the kid had turned out to be a black sheep, his family no doubt glad he could no longer disgrace them. The episode was over and done with, except for the spending of the five thousand dollars.

Sam Rhett looked with quickening interest at the photograph of Caddo Thor. The man was not as tall as Rhett, but heavier, with slender hips tapering up to the powerful shoulders of a wrestler. There was a look of wariness and power on Caddo Thor's hawkish features, a certain relentlessness in his wide-spread eyes.

Rhett tossed the snapshot aside. His only interest in lawbreakers was the bounty on their heads or the prestige their capture would bring him. It wasn't likely that Caddo Thor would show up in Gunsmoke Bend.

BUT Thor *did* show up in Gunsmoke Bend, a while before sundown four days later. From his office window, Sam Rhett saw the horse and rider moving slowly along the street. There was no mistaking the powerful shoulders, the dark, hawkish features, and the wary, wide-spaced eyes. Caddo Thor slouched with seeming carelessness in the saddle, but his cold eyes probed into every doorway and window.

Rhett watched, careful to keep hidden, as Thor rode along the street and stopped before the livery stable. Before dismounting, the killer looked carefully both ways along the street. Then he quickly led his sweat-caked roan into the livery.

Rhett waited, and after a while Caddo Thor came from the livery. Again he paused and looked warily along the darkening street, then walked quickly along the boardwalk and entered the Border Queen Saloon. Nobody, except Sam Rhett, had taken much notice of him.

Marshal Rhett put his feet on the scarred desk and whistled a tuneless ditty between his protruding teeth. Thor, he figured, would be in the saloon for some time, eating and drinking. Nobody, except Rhett, knew he

was an outlaw. And in that lay some advantage.

The sun had long since set and shadows were gathering swiftly. Rhett sat there as it got dark, watching the square of light that marked the Border Queen's doorway. Finally he got up and went out, crossing the dark street to a point midway between the Border Queen and the livery stable. There he stationed himself, in the mouth of a narrow, ink-black alley, and waited.

It was almost an hour later when Caddo Thor came out of the saloon. As before, he shot quick, probing glances along the street. He made a cigarette, the red match-glow lighting his dark, chiseled features. Then he strode quickly along the walk toward the livery.

Rhett stepped suddenly from the dark alley, jabbing his gun muzzle roughly against Caddo Thor's spine. He said sharply, "Don't move, Thor, or I'll blow you apart!"

Caddo Thor cursed, a low, violent sound in the dark. But he gauged the savage threat in Rhett's voice correctly, and he stood still.

"You seem to hold the top hand, friend," he said calmly. "What is it—a stick-up?"

Rhett said, "You'll find out, soon enough. Just do like I tell you, if you want to live!"

He took Thor's gun. Thor's lips still held the cigarette, and Rhett could see the fierce anger and hatred on the man's face in the reddish glow. He backed away slightly.

"Turn and walk across the street," he said. "I'll be right behind you. Move wrong and I'll kill you."

With the feel of Rhett's gun-muzzle against his back, Thor crossed the street. Five minutes later they were in the marshal's office, a lighted lamp on the desk, the shades drawn. Caddo Thor sat slouched in a chair. Rhett was seated across the desk from him, the gun still in his hand. Rhett had taken the picture of Caddo Thor from a desk drawer. He showed it to the dark-faced man.

"You deny that that's a picture of you?" he asked.

The outlaw shrugged. "Any fool could see it is. What about it?"

"It means you admit your name's Caddo Thor, and that you're wanted for murder in Rosillos County. Is that right?"

"You seem to know all the answers. You're a John Law, I take it?"

"Marshal. And it's my business to know the answers. The point is, it's my duty to lock you up and send word to the Rosillos sheriff. He'll come after you, and you won't get away again. You'll hang!"

CADDO THOR said nothing. He sat with powerful shoulders slightly hunched, looking with narrowed, calculating eyes at the gaunt marshal. He could see that there was something on Sam Rhett's mind.

"Who did you kill, and why?" Rhett asked.

Thor said bluntly, "You ask too damn many questions. If you aim to lock me up, why don't you do it?"

"In a hurry?" Rhett sneered. "The quicker I put you in a cell and send Sheriff Cralle a wire, the quicker you'll feel a rope about your neck. You want to die that way, Thor?"

Caddo Thor licked dry lips, absentmindedly rubbing his corded neck.

"No, nor any other way. And I don't like to whip the devil about a stump. You've got a proposition. What is it?"

Rhett laughed softly. "You're smart, Thor—just how smart I'll know in a few minutes. Like I said, I'm a town marshal—but as for law and order, as such, I don't give a red damn. That strike you as queer?"

"I'm used to queer things, where the law's concerned. You don't give a hoot for the law, and neither do I. So what?"

"But you do give a hoot for your neck. Well, I'll make you a swap: Your neck, for a little chore I want done."

"What kind of chore?"

"I want a bank robbed." The crooked marshal leaned forward, tapping the desk top with his gun-muzzle. "The bank here in Gunsmoke Bend, Thor. I want you to clean it out and turn the money over to me."

"What would I get out of it?"

"Your neck—what the hell more do you want? Look, Thor—you didn't make the proposition, and you're not namin' the terms. I make the proposition and terms, and you can take 'em—or hang!"

Caddo Thor was quiet a moment, and Rhett could see the open contempt in his smoky-brown eyes. Unaccountably, it sent a thin thread of anger through the marshal.

Sharply, he asked, "Well, what do you think?"

"I think that's a hell of a proposition for a marshal to make," Thor said bluntly. "Let's get it straight: You want a bank robbed, and you don't have the guts to do it yourself. You've got it all planned for me to do it. I turn the money over to you, and you turn me loose. That the way it adds up?"

"That's it."

"What if I won't do it—what if I should tell some folks, honest folks, what their marshal tried to get me to do?"

"You don't have to do it; it's your choice. Now let me ask a question: What if I should go to some folks and tell 'em I'd just had a run-in with a murderer named Caddo Thor—that he'd resisted arrest and I had to kill him? I could show 'em the body to prove it."

Caddo Thor murmured, "That way, huh? I can see you would do it, too. You're a smelly skunk, marshal. You'd—"

"Shut up!" Sam Rhett snarled. His pale eyes were murderous. "You've got thirty seconds to make up your mind, and I don't care which way you jump!"

Thor shrugged. "I don't need that long. Fool is one of the few things I've never been called. I'll do it. When—and how?"

"TOMORROW," Rhett said, feeling a swift, fierce current of triumph through him. He outlined his plans now, as thoroughly as if he meant to go through with them. "About noon, when old Ben McGarrah will be alone in the bank. There's a back door to the bank, opening into a narrow passage that leads to the front part of the bank. You'll go in this way, through a back alley, and leave the same way. I'll have a horse saddled and waiting at a rack at the back end of the alley. You get on the horse and ride to a spot I'll name later, where I'll be waiting for you. There I'll take the money, and turn a fresh horse over to you."

"What if somebody tries to stop me?"

"I don't think they will. It's your job to knock old McGarrah over the head with your gun, to make sure he doesn't give the alarm. That way, you ought to be able to sneak out of town without bein' seen. Anyway, you'll wear a mask."

"What makes you think I'd be sap enough to bring that bank money to you? What's to keep me from just linin' out, with my neck and a pile of money, too?"

Rhett smiled coldly. "I'd thought of that. In the first place, the gun you rob the bank with won't be loaded—except with blanks. Second place, the horse I'll leave for you will be old and slow as molasses. Try to double-cross me, and I'd catch up with you and kill you before you'd gone ten miles. And make no mistake, I *would* kill you."

"What about the other horse you'll have waiting for me?"

"It'll be plenty fast to take you wherever you want to go—and the farther you go the better it'll suit me. Just do as I say and you'll be all right. Everything clear?"

Thor's lips twisted sardonically. "Plenty clear!"

Marshal Sam Rhett, his chair tilted against the wall near a rear window of Blodgett's general merchandise store, whittled on a pine strip and

gazed absently through the window. He appeared relaxed and casual—but inside he was tense and wolf-eager.

It was almost noon. Ten minutes ago he had left Caddo Thor in his office, with a gun loaded with blank shells, after giving him final instructions. From his position here, Rhett could see Thor when he crossed the back street and entered the bank. And Thor was due any minute now.

Rhett's lips curled down cynically, remembering another scene like this less than a month ago. Only then, it had been slender, yellow-haired young Johnny Cralle who had crossed the street and gone into the bank. Five minutes later he was dead. Johnny, roaring drunk on whisky Rhett had furnished, had thought it would be a swell prank to play bank robber and throw a scare into nervous old Ben McGarrah. But Rhett, playing his murderous game with savage earnestness, had shot the fun-loving youth down as he stood there with his empty gun in hand.

Sam Rhett tensed suddenly. Caddo Thor, walking slowly along the dusty back alley, had paused before the rear door of the bank building just across the alley from where Rhett sat. Then Thor suddenly pushed open the bank door and entered, adjusting an improvised mask over his face at the same time.

RHETT got up quickly, walking the length of the store, with a swift, choppy stride, and went onto the front street. He ran along the strip of soft earth between the boardwalk and the buildings, stooped low so anybody in the bank couldn't see him. As he surged through the bank's front doorway, his gun was in hand. He'd done this before, and he went about it with cold precision.

Caddo Thor had had time to adjust his mask, walk the length of the passageway and throw down on old McGarrah in the cashier's cage. Afterward, McGarrah would swear that the dead man had been robbing the bank. Then he, Rhett, would collect another five thousand dollars in bounty money.

Entering the bank, Rhett saw just what he'd expected. Caddo Thor stood on wide-spread legs before the cashier's cage, facing skinny, bald Ben McGarrah. Thor's back was turned, so Rhett couldn't see the gun in his hand.

Rhett yelled, "You damned, thievin' skunk—I told you to get outa town!" and his gun snaked up.

At the same instant, Caddo Thor whirled, leaping away from the cashier's cage. A cold little shock went through Rhett. Thor didn't have a mask over his face, and he didn't have a gun in his hand. The stark certainty came to the marshal that, somehow, he had been tricked. The realization rattled him, and his first shot went wild.

With incredible speed, as he whirled away from the cage, Caddo Thor had drawn his black-handled pistol. Sam Rhett saw a tongue of flame leap out fiercely at him, felt the hammering slash of lead at his body. He tried to lift his gun but couldn't, and the room started whirling crazily before his eyes.

Then terror rose wild and gibbering inside him, because he knew he was down on the floor and that he was dying. He saw Caddo Thor coming toward him through a red mist. As if from a vast distance he heard Thor's cold voice:

"That's pay for Johnny Cralle, Rhett. Johnny was my kid brother. My name's Caddo Thor, all right—Caddo Thor Cralle, sheriff of Rosillos. I'd heard about your skunky tricks, Rhett, and when you wrote me that you'd killed Johnny while he was robbing a bank, I figured out just about what happened. So I sent you that picture of myself, sayin' it was a killer who'd escaped from my jail. I figured, once you'd captured Caddo Thor, you'd try just about the same rotten trick on him that you'd pulled on Johnny Cralle. And you did. Only I happened to have some extra car-

tridges sewed in the cuff of my trousers. You got paid in your own filthy coin, Rhett—"

Then Rhett didn't hear any more, and never would.

A crowd was gathering in the bank, excited and asking questions. Old McGarrah had come from the cashier's cage.

"Sam Rhett must have gone crazy," he declared. "This gent here is Sheriff Cralle, of Rosillos County. He'd just come into the bank and was asking if I knew a man named Jim Cawthorn, when Rhett came running in. He meant to kill Cralle, no doubt about that, and for no reason I could see. It was self-defense. Sheriff, can you figure it out?"

Sheriff Caddo Cralle said grimly, "Looks like Marshal Rhett made a mistake!"

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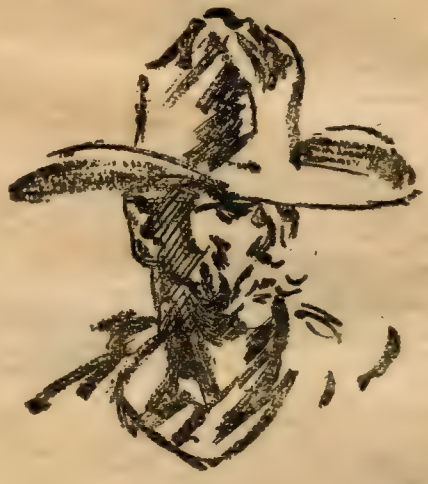
When a hoosegow hombre came back to get even with Beaver Tait the oldster cooked up a scheme to make a . . . .

Polecat Payoff

By Barry Gardner

IT WAS late afternoon of an early fall day when young Johnny Brent stopped by Beaver Tait's place there on the edge of the Porcupine Hills. Johnny, with a little outfit six miles farther on, was old Beaver's friend and nearest neighbor.



At Beaver's invitation to "light down and eat," freckled, red-haired Johnny Brent shook his head. He looked worried.

""No time," he said. "Here's the chawin' you sent to Red Wells for. You had any visitors today?"

"Nope. You're about the only one ever visits me."

"Then you ain't heard about Yaqui Lukes?"

Wiry, bearded old Beaver Tait paused in the act of worrying off a jawful of Apple Cure. "What about him?"

"He broke outa the pen four days ago, killin' a guard in the shuffle. And he's headed back this way. He was seen over close to Lee's Ford last night."

Beaver wrenched off the chew. "What's that got to do with me? I ain't a sheriff."

"Look, Beaver," Johnny said earnestly, "you know what it's got to do with you. Ain't but one reason that snake'd head back for the Porcupines—to kill you, like he swore he'd do when they sent him away."

"Mebby so," Beaver acknowledged in a thoughtful tone. "But Lukes oughta be satisfied, looks like. He killed my boy, Tommy. Then, when I had *him* cold and could have killed him, I didn't do it. I turned him over to the law, and a jury, instead of hangin' him, sent him to the pen for life. Seems like he ought to appreciate me not killin' him, when I could have and should have."

"You think a rattler'd have any gratitude? That's what Yaqui Lukes is—a human snake. You didn't kill him, like you'd oughta, but it was your testimony that sent him to the pen. He swore he'd get loose, somehow, and come back and kill you, and now he aims to do it. He's had just about time to get over here from Lee's Ford. Mebby I better come over here and—"

"Reckon I kin take care of myself," Beaver interrupted bluntly. "Though I appreciate it, kid. My rheumatiz

has started in, dagnab it. Meant to send for some medicine and forgot it."

Johnny warned, "You got more than rheumatism to worry about."

"Yeah. Mebby you're wrong about Lukes comin' back to get even with me. But I'll keep my eyes peeled, anyway."

JOHNNY BRENT wasn't wrong, however. Yaqui Lukes struck suddenly, early that night, as Beaver was preparing supper in his log cabin. He entered by a back door, with the stealth of a big, stalking cat, and swung a club murderously at Beaver's head. Old Beaver, belatedly warned, tried to fling himself to one side, but the club caught him a glancing blow behind the ear and smashed him to the floor.

He didn't lose consciousness entirely. As if from a vast distance he saw Lukes' giant figure over him, saw the killer's dark, cruel, savage features and his staring little eyes. He was dimly conscious that Lukes, instead of killing him, was binding him with strips of rope.

Minutes later, when his head cleared, Beaver saw that he was lying on a bunk. Yaqui Lukes stood over him, staring fixedly down at him, his swarthy face a cruel pattern of hate and triumph.

Gutturally, Lukes said, "Thought for a while I'd croaked you. I'm glad I didn't. Had you forgot I said I'd come back and get you, old man?"

"No more'n I'd forgot the rattler that bit me once," Beaver said calmly. "Looks like you hold the top cards."

"And I aim to keep on holdin' 'em." The big killer grinned as if at pleasant thoughts. "For three years, in that steamin' hellhole, I thought about what I'd do to you when I got loose. Now I'm loose, and I aim to have me some fun."

Beaver was weak and sick from the blow on his head. He knew he didn't have one chance in a thousand of getting loose—and he knew he could expect no mercy from Yaqui Lukes.

A little over three years ago Beaver's twenty-two-year-old son, Tommy, had lived here on the Bar 2 with Beaver. Yaqui Lukes had owned a run-down outfit farther up in the hills. They'd suspected that Lukes was stealing their cattle, and one day Tommy had caught the hillman redhanded. But Lukes had tricked Tommy, and shot him in the back.

Whereupon, old Beaver had taken Lukes' trail. Deep in the badlands he'd come up with the giant, had wounded and captured him, and taken him out to Red Wells to the sheriff. At the trial, Beaver's testimony had largely convicted Lukes. But instead of hanging Lukes, a jury had sentenced him to life imprisonment. And now Yaqui Lukes was back, vengeance-hungry . . . .

"Have your fun and be danged," Beaver said calmly. "Which shows that when you have a chance to tromp on a rattler you better do it."

"Meanin' what, you ol' goat?"

"Meanin' I shoulda killed you up there in the badlands that day, instead of turnin' you over to the law."

"Yeah, you made a mistake there, and you made another when you lied me into the pen."

"I didn't lie. You stole my cattle, and you killed my boy. I'd sworn to tell the truth, and I did. You couldn't blame me for that."

"Couldn't I? And I can't blame you for the last four days of runnin' and hidin' and starvin' like a thievin' dog, either, can I? Your time's up, old man—but I aim to hear you squeal and beg first."

Beaver grunted, "I won't beg. Get on with your skunky work!"

"Plenty time." Lukes sniffed the air, grinning. "What's that I smell cookin'? I ain't eat for nearly two days. Reckon I can enjoy myself better on a full stummick. So my fun'll have to wait till I eat."

"I'd sooner feed a wolverine!"

THE giant gouged the toe of his boot brutally into Beaver's side, and snarled, "Shut up! And you better stay quiet while I eat."

Bread and potatoes, already cooked, were on the table. Lukes, still sniffing, went to the cook stove and opened the oven. He peered inside, smacking his lips.

"Roasted possum, huh?" he said greedily. "By gosh, ain't nothin' I like better'n roasted possum—and it's been over four years since I tasted any!"

Beaver said sharply, "Let that meat alone. It ain't—"

"Shut up! You won't have any use for that meat, so I aim to eat it."

"Like heck you are! I'm cookin' it for—"

Furiously, Lukes said, "Didn't I say for you to stay quiet while I eat? Blast you, now I'll make you do it!"

The big killer whirled and strode to the bunk. He tore strips from a blanket and stuffed them into Beaver's protesting mouth, gagging him securely. Then he returned to the stove. He opened the oven and took out the pan that held the steaming, juicy meat.

Beaver watched, wide-eyed, as Yaqui Lukes carved a generous portion of the meat and dumped it onto a plate with the potatoes. The swarthy hillman ate wolfishly, washing the food down with great gulps of scalding coffee. And Beaver Tait watched, unable to speak and barely able to move, waiting for what he knew was inevitable . . . .

An hour later, young Johnny Brent rode up to the cabin. He dismounted and came inside, looking amazedly at the still figure there on the cabin floor, then at old Beaver bound and gagged on the bunk.

Hastily, he released Beaver.

"I got worried, and decided to ride over and see if you was all right," Johnny said. "What in Tophet's happened?"

"Yaqui Lukes came back to get even with me," Beaver explained. "But he was powerful hungry, and he decided to eat first. I had some meat cookin' in the stove, and he thought it was roast possum and ate it."

"What about it?"

"Happens it wasn't possum—it was skunk. I was cookin' the skunk to get the oil for my rheumatiz."

"I still don't *sabe*. Skunk meat is good—lots of folks like it better'n possum or coon, or even chicken."

"Not *this* skunk," Beaver said grimly. "I tried to tell Lukes, but he wouldn't listen. Happens the only way I could catch that skunk was with poison. It was plumb full of strychnine—and now Yaqui Lukes is!"

Owlhoot Badge-Toter

When badman Clay Walcott rescued a kidnaped younker from a rival gang of road agents, he didn't expect to win a tin star. Or that he'd be catapulted into a feud with drygulch gunmen on one side and a pistol posse on the other.

By J. Edward Leithead

AT THE head of his gang, made up of five seasoned owlhooters who could frisk a stage or alter a brand with equal facility, Clay Walcott rode down the mountain trail. Despite the darkness and the narrow trail's windings, their sure-footed horses made no misstep. It was familiar ground to men and mounts, and the road which skirted the foot of the

mountain was likewise familiar. The stages, running east and west, made daily trips over it, often as not with something in the boot.

The Walcott gang had, until six months previously, held six-shooter claim to all that section of Wyoming rangeland between the Mustang Mountains and Silvertip River as their special raiding ground. Then the Tucker brothers, Mel and Van, had cut in with their big longriding outfit. They were keen to drive the smaller gang out of Sioux County and have its rich pickings themselves.

"Hope we're ahead of the Tuckers this trip," Clay half-hipped in the saddle to address the nearest rider, Shannon. "The way that outfit's spotted treasure coaches for the past two months, it looks to me like they've an undercover man planted at stage headquarters."

"Yes," agreed Shannon, Clay's right bower. "But with the capture of Mel's younger brother a week ago, maybe the gang's on the downgrade. Van was the brains, I understand. Too smart for his boots, though. Walked into the hotel at Sandstone, registered under a false name. Didn't figure anybody knew him by sight. But Sheriff Bates did, and arrested him. Sheriff was wounded doin' it, but they're holdin' Van for trial at the county jail."

"I know," said Walcott.

Hitting the stage road at the foot of the mountain, Walcott led eastward. There was a night stage from Cheyenne, which ought to have payroll money aboard for the mines farther west. The owlhoot leader's alert ears caught the sound of voices before they'd ridden a mile, and presently he discerned the coach in the road, surrounded by a lot of men. His lips puffed angrily—the Tucker gang had beaten them to the holdup again!

Walcott turned off the trail to the left, suddenly drew rein at the whinnying of a horse concealed by the roadside thickets. Tucker brothers' longriders evidently had grouped their horses at that spot. As Walcott and his men swung down, Shannon asked in a low tone:

"What do you want to do, Clay?"

"Listen!" Clay pressed his arm, peering at the dimly visible coach and shifting forms. A woman's voice had risen in protest, and a child began crying. "They've got the passengers out. Robbin' women and kids, seems like. That never was our style."

The deep voice of Mel Tucker came more or less clearly:

"You admit, ma'am, you're Governor Antrim's sister, and that's his youngster? We knew you were takin' stage from the capital and we want young Johnny to exchange for my brother, Van, who's jailed at Sandstone."

"You can't—" the woman began hysterically.

"Won't hurt the kid a mite, Miss Antrim," broke in Mel Tucker, "if you don't act up. Hand him over, or—"

The woman screamed, and sounds of a struggle ensued. Walcott's anger grew. Not the odds, but the fear of bullets striking the passengers, held him rooted, thinking fast. People climbed back into the stage, the Governor's sister still voicing her anguish.

"You tell Antrim," Mel Tucker called after her, "that soon as my brother joins us, we'll put Johnny down in Sandstone."

THE driver cracked his whip, cursing the bandits. Walcott spoke to his men in guarded tone, and before the stage had fairly started, he was gliding up the gully in the direction of that betraying whinny. The Tucker horse guard was putting foot in stirrup when Clay carefully parted the bushes at his back. The Colt in Walcott's hand rose and fell. With a grunt, the Tucker man went limp and Clay eased him to earth, then cracked him on the head again to insure silence.

Mel Tucker bellowed from the

middle of the road, "Ready to go, Dan!"

Walcott rose to the saddle of one horse, drove the rest out of the thicket. He came last, hat brim jerked low, noting the position of the numerous owlhooters. Some were bending over the express box. Mel stood a little apart, clutching the kicking, wailing boy.

Walcott received scant attention until he was close to the towering figure of the elder Tucker. Mel wanted someone to catch his horse, and Clay grabbed the reins of the nearest bronc to lead it up. He must have picked the right animal, for Mel laid a hand on the bridle and thrust Johnny at the rider, growling:

"Hold him a minute, and watch out! The brat bites!"

Clay took the small, resisting figure into the curve of his left arm, leaving his right hand free. Well that he did so, for Tucker sensed something wrong the next instant. He stared up at Walcott and suddenly shouted Clay's name.

The younger outlaw kicked his horse to turn it, pitched out his right-hand Colt. As it blazed, the quick jump of Tucker's mount saved Tucker from a lead chunk in his brain by a scant margin. Bent over the frightened boy, Walcott sped across the road. He bucked the thickets while his mates, obeying orders to create a diversion the minute he turned tail, opened up with crashing guns.

Rallying swiftly from their surprise, Tucker's longriders slashed fire at unseen enemies and flung into saddles. The Walcott gang's shooting ceased after the leader hit the brush on the run, but Mel Tucker, suspicious of a trick to draw him off, yelled as he straddled leather:

"Bunch of you stay here with the strongbox! We'll fetch that Johnny kid!"

More than half of the Tucker gang thundered in pursuit of Clay and the boy. Rescue of Johnny Antrim had come first with Walcott, but he had told Shannon to gather up the express box if, in their excitement, Mel's owlhooters left it unguarded. Perceiving there was no chance for five of them to defeat the watchful gang in the road, Shannon turned southward to catch up to his boss.

Clay was finding himself hard pressed. His plan to overtake the stage and return Johnny to his aunt, even at the risk of a fight with the shotgun guard, was dismissed.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, sonny," he muttered soothingly to the youngster partly resting on his saddle. "I aim to take you home, where them bad hombres can't bother you."

"They were bad, weren't they?" piped Johnny, who had stopped his outcries. "I want to go to Aunt Selma. She's worried."

Clay didn't reply, for gunfire now mingled with the hoofbeats rearward. A glance over his shoulder revealed that the powder flashes were not all aimed his way. Obviously his men had followed him, cut in ahead of his pursuers. Walcott, knowing every foot of the ground over which he fled, deplored the fact that there wasn't a spot within several miles where they could all head in and give fire to the Tucker gang.

HE TURNED his head again. Two horsemen were near enough for him to be sure of their identity—Shannon and Burke. They were both riding loosely, as though badly hurt. Burke plunged suddenly to the grass, but Shannon spurred on, able to lift his voice just high enough for Clay to catch the words over the hoof pounding:

"Didn't get the strongbox! You come a cropper helpin' that kid, Clay! All the boys downed but me, and I—and I—"

Shannon's speech trailed off, and while Walcott looked at him, bent in the saddle, he was out of it, sprawling on the prairie sod, in two more leaps of his bronco. Clay's lips set

grimly. The loss of his entire gang was a big price to pay for Johnny's rescue. And he and the boy were by no means in the clear. Mel Tucker's longriders hadn't abandoned the chase.

Walcott reined his horse toward Silvertip River flowing sluggishly a mile distant. The stream made a horseshoe bend not far below, and the banks were thickly grown to underbrush. Man and boy made it to the river well in advance of the pursuing outlaws.

Reluctant to turn his horse loose, Walcott drove it over the high bank, slipped off beneath an overhang of tangled tree roots with Johnny under his arm. His enemies might search for miles up and down the river, hampered by the dark, unless they had noted the spot where he had gone down the embankment. He cautioned Johnny to absolute silence, gripped his horse's muzzle as riders roared by on the river trail. They didn't come back that way.

It was late morning when Clay with Johnny proudly clutching the reins, walked his horse into Sandstone, the county seat. The boy had told Clay that Aunt Selma owned a millinery shop in town. His aunt had been bringing motherless John from Cheyenne to stay with her while the Governor was away on a hunting trip, his summer vacation.

Walcott eyed the long street for sign of the sheriff, nodded as Johnny pointed out the little cottage with a white fence around it. He was lifting the boy down at the gate when the house door opened, and a young woman with corn-gold hair hurried along the pebbled pathway.

Selma Antrim, unable to speak as she gathered up bright-faced Johnny in her arms, thanked Clay with a look from the bluest eyes he had ever seen. Then she asked him into the house. Selma didn't know him, that was certain.

"I'd better amble along," he said. "It was nothin'. I just happened to witness the kidnapin'."

"Oh, but you must stay and meet the Governor," insisted Selma. "He'll be here today. I wired him the moment I arrived last night."

Between them, she and Johnny got him into the house. He would be safe there from curious eyes, though, as a matter of fact, he felt indifferent to danger since his followers were gone. As Selma served him with the finest meal he'd ever eaten, Clay Walcott reviewed his past with disgust. At twenty-eight he'd missed the best in life.

WHEN the Governor, a strapping, handsome man, arrived that afternoon with several well-armed horsemen, he was overjoyed at finding his son safe. He regarded Clay in silence while Selma repeated the story of the boy's rescue as the outlaw had told it to her.

"You're Clay Walcott, aren't you?" Governor Antrim said abruptly. "Leader of one of our most notorious owlhoot gangs?"

Clay nodded coldly. "But my men were wiped out last night. Every one of 'em. Helpin' to get Johnny away from the Tucker crowd."

Selma, wide-eyed at learning his identity, addressed her brother: "I hope, John, you haven't any idea of sending for the sheriff. It would be useless, anyhow. Bates died yesterday of wounds received while arresting Van Tucker."

"So?" Antrim raised heavy eyebrows. "I wasn't thinking of getting the sheriff. But, since he's gone, I'd like you to fill his boots, Walcott. Setting an outlaw to catch outlaws has worked time and again in the West. If I appoint you special sheriff, will you go after the Tucker gang?"

"It's the one thing I want to do, now," replied Clay, concealing his astonishment.

"The Tucker brothers," went on the Governor, "never have hesitated to kill when they robbed. None of your

outfit, so far as I know, ever was wanted for murder. Any man who'll go to the length you did to save a child must have a lot of good in him. We'll try to bring it out. I promise, Walcott, that if you've cleaned up the Tucker longriders by the time I return from my hunting trip, I'll sign a full pardon for you."

"Splendid, John!" exclaimed Selma, and Clay glanced wonderingly at her luminous eyes.

The Governor put out his hand. "Come along, Walcott. We'll have the justice of the peace swear you in, and we'll get that sheriff's badge. A few people may not like the idea of my putting you in a position of authority, but you'll have to stand the snubbing."

That evening, Clay Walcott stood at the Antler Bar. A posse, riding out the night previously, had just come back to learn of Johnny's safe return. They were all there in the saloon, glaring at the star on Clay's vest. Clay Walcott!

Deputy Sheriff Colbert, who had expected to take the sheriff's place, tossed his badge on the bar with a scowl. "The Governor has the power to appoint an owlhooter lawman if he wants to, but I don't have to serve under one!"

"Why, this scum of the range," Hale, the stage agent exploded, almost in Walcott's face, "robbed our coaches regular before the Tucker brothers came along!"

"And he run off my cattle!" roared Slocomb, cowman from upriver. "Governor Antrim must be crazy!"

"I'll get the top rail off the hitch-rack," eagerly offered a shifty-eyed stage hostler, one Petrey, "if you want to ride him outa town on it!"

A lanky youth, with large hands and feet, a six-shooter riding each hip, slipped down the bar toward Clay. His eyes glowed murderously.

"Always heard you were chain-lightnin', Walcott. I'm Sid Denning. I claim I'm faster than you. Want to gamble?"

Clay had observed the notched handles of Denning's guns and eyed him in disdain. "Don't try to add me to your collection, whippersnapper! I like 'em man-size. And I'm real lucky!" He knew the type—a glory-seeker, with the heart of a coyote.

Paying Denning no more heed, Walcott picked up the discarded deputy's badge. He slowly surveyed the roomful of hostile faces.

"You won't give me a chance to make good, will you, boys? It'd be handy havin' a deputy or two, but I reckon nobody will wear this star under me." Receiving no answer, he turned and walked out.

OVER at the jail, he looked in upon the lone prisoner, Van Tucker. Unlike his huge, shaggy brother, Van was slim and dandified, with a foxy face. That afternoon Clay had told him how he came to be appointed special sheriff.

"Leavin' revenge out of it," said Van, his face pressed to the iron bars, "what's in this for you, Clay? A pardon or somethin'?"

"Yes," said Clay.

"Antrim'll never issue it," declared Van. "Too much against you, Clay. He's just eggin' you on to get rid of our outfit. Now, if you'll help me break jail, I'll fix it up with Mel so's you can throw in with us, seein' you have no men of your own."

Walcott didn't trouble to reply.

While pondering how to go about rounding up the Tucker wild bunch next day, Clay was interrupted by Johnny Antrim, who dashed in and climbed on his knee.

"I'm glad you're here, Clay," he said gravely. "I can come to see you every day." He peered down at the Colt on the sheriff's left hip. "Let me play with your gun?"

Grinning, Clay flipped out the weapon and extracted the shells before turning it over. "Aunt Selma know you're out, kid?"

"Oh, yes." Johnny was pulling the

hair-trigger delightedly. "She's waiting outside."

Walcott led him to the door, dangling the big gun. Selma looked startled.

"It ain't loaded," Clay reassured her. "Glad to have him visit me any time he wants."

"Well, you probably have plenty on your mind today," Selma smiled, "so we'll be running along. Come, Johnny."

Back in the office, Clay broke the gun and was about to insert cartridges when he thought of something. He didn't know where the Tucker gang holed up, and it suddenly occurred to him how their hideaway might be uncovered. He restored the left-hand Colt to leather empty.

Shortly after dark he tied two horses at the jail rack, went inside and unlocked the door of Van Tucker's cell. He entered, carrying a pair of steel cuffs. Both his guns were holstered. Van noted this seeming carelessness with narrowing gaze.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Overheard a plot to swing you before your trial," replied Clay. "I'm takin' you to Elkhorn for jailin' where you'll be safe from a mob. Saddled horses out front. Put these on, Van, and we'll be ridin'."

Van stepped up, his body tensed. His hands shot forward, but not to be manacled. The outlaw's left fist cracked on Clay's chin, his right snaked the Colt from the sheriff's portside scabbard. Walcott, expecting the attack, hadn't been able to duck the flying fist, but he contrived to reel against the cell door as Van went through and prevent him from locking it.

"If you follow me, I'll kill you, Clay!" snapped Van, holding the empty gun on the sheriff.

Walcott stood swaying by the cell door, making no play for the loaded six-shooter in his belt. He didn't move a step, in fact, until he heard hoofbeats proclaiming Tucker's departure. Then he ran from the jail and blazed away at the rider galloping west up Main Street. All his shots went wild. He could see Van's arm jerking as he tried to fire the Colt that was as harmless as a cap pistol.

IN NO time at all, before Van Tucker had got beyond the town limits, Clay was the center of a clamorous crowd.

"How'd he get away?" demanded Slocomb, the cowman.

Clay's explanation, which didn't refer to any trip to Elkhorn for Tucker's safety, was derided by his listeners.

"Outlaws hang together sometimes," declared Colbert, ex-deputy sheriff. "They forget private feuds. Reckon Walcott's got an offer to join up with the Tuckers."

"You're wrong!" snapped Clay. "And lettin' off steam this way ain't goin' to recapture Van. I'll prove where I stand by leadin' you after him, soon's you've saddled!"

A rush for horses ensued. The younger Tucker hadn't had much of a start. There seemed a good chance of overtaking him. He was spied topping a ridge northward, ten minutes after the posse swept out of Sandstone.

"He's headin' up to the Mustang range," Walcott called to the riders nearest him. "If he leads us to the gang's hideaway—I never did know where it was—some good'll come of Van's breakin' jail."

In the event that the experiment failed, he dared not tell them he had turned Tucker loose for that purpose. Riding behind the sheriff, Petrey, the stage hostler, glued his eyes to the back of Clay's head. He sensed a trick, for tricking people was Petrey's forte.

When the posse struck the north slope of the ridge, not a trace of Van Tucker was visible in any direction. Nor had he been sighted after another half hour's saddlework, with the Mustang foothills several miles away.

"It's turned into a wild goose

chase," growled Slocomb.

"If you fellows are game to camp out the night," said Sheriff Walcott, "his trail ought to be plain as print, come daylight."

The possemen agreed, unsaddled in a boulder-strewn hollow. Then Petrey shuffled up to the sheriff.

"Don't you reckon it'd be safer to keep a man on guard?" he suggested. "I'll volunteer for first trick."

Walcott nodded slowly. "All right, Petrey. Take it."

But when Clay rolled up in his saddle blanket, it wasn't to sleep. There was something mysterious about Petrey, and he worked at stage headquarters. Walcott lay so that he could keep an eye on the guard. As snoring arose from the cocoon-like shapes around him, Clay saw the stage wrangler walk past the horses and climb a low hill. The sheriff left his blanket and stole after him.

Caution made him slow. By the time he had gained the hill and was crawling upward from rock to rock, a brush fire blazed on the crest. It proved what Clay had always believed, that the Tucker gang had an undercover man in town. Petrey was signaling the position of the manhunters to his outlaw friends in the mountains. The sheriff was nearing the hilltop when a rock rolled under his boot, making so much noise going downhill that Petrey must have heard it.

WALCOTT sprang forward, gun in hand. A shadowy figure leaped from the fire into rimming darkness, and Clay let drive. Petrey answered, but he, too, missed. Before playing hide-and-seek with the fellow, Clay realized he had to put out that fire. If allowed to burn, it would bring the Tucker gang upon them and they weren't situated any too well for a fight.

He jumped at the blazing brush, disregarding the fact he would be a fair target for the invisible Petrey. Clay had scattered some of the sticks when Petrey's Colt roared. The bullet nipped Clay's arm. Doing a sort of mad war dance to stamp out the flames, he fired back haphazard. A heavy blow on the head hurled him into the smoking brush.

The east was graying when Walcott returned to consciousness. Sounds of battle surrounded him. He tried to get up, found himself handcuffed. The possemen were squatting behind boulders, around which raced shooting horsebackers. A horse screamed as a bullet knocked it down. Another horse uttered the same blood-chilling cry, and men shouted. Four of the posse rushed toward a point outside the hollow, their six-shooters banging. All that Clay could see for a moment was thick dust and an occasional spurt of pistol fire. Then the gunwork ceased, and through the dust came the manhunters, dragging two men. He heard Hale, the stage agent, exclaim:

"We got 'em—both the Tuckers alive! They were ridin' close together.

Reckon the gang'll draw off now. If they don't, it's all day with Mel and Van!"

The sun came up while the followers of the captured Tuckers hung on the outskirts of the lawmen's camp.

"Better get 'em to Sandstone while them skunks out yonder are hesitatin'," advised Slocomb. "Walcott, too."

"Why me?" asked the sheriff, getting their attention. "I've been waitin' for somebody to explain these handcuffs."

"Because," snapped the stage agent, "you fetched the Tuckers to wipe us out with the fire on the hill. We found you layin' in the ashes, after Petrey creased you."

"It was Petrey himself built that fire!" rapped the sheriff. "He's undercover man for the Tuckers!"

Petrey denied it heatedly when the possemen turned to him. Mel and Van, sitting bound, grinned malevolently at their one-time rival. Van nodded.

"Sure, it was Walcott! He'd agreed to join us. We don't know Petrey at all."

The posse saddled, mounted the prisoners and started back to Sandstone, trailed at a respectful distance by the Tucker longriders. They dropped out finally.

As the posse clattered into town, Clay jerked his head at a child's sudden outcry. Johnny, with arms extended, stood on the sidewalk beside his aunt. Feeling the hot blood surge into his cheeks, the sheriff waved manacled hands.

The possemen locked Clay and the Tuckers in separate cells, and the killer-eyed Sid Denning offered to play jailer. Hale, Slocomb, Colbert, Petrey and the rest went over to the J. P.'s office. The magistrate set the hearing for the following morning. Then the posse broke up, giving Petrey a chance to slip out and meet the Tucker longriders.

"You hang around till a little after dark," he told them. "I've got a plan. If Mel and Van ain't let loose tonight, they're through!"

DURING the day, Petrey made a surreptitious visit to the stone storehouse of the Northwest Mining Company, carrying away a quantity of dynamite. About eight o'clock that night a tremendous explosion rocked the town. With the blinding flash, a big section of the street heaved skyward and houses at either side collapsed. Men and women ran wildly to and fro, at first thinking it was an earthquake.

In the jail, the Tucker brothers hammered on cell bars and roared to be let out. But Walcott was quiet, recognizing the blast as dynamite and remembering that Petrey was still loose in Sandstone. Denning, the notch-cutter, ran to the front door.

A pall of smoke overhung the center of the town, and hoofbeats at the east side called his attention to seven or eight furious riders pounding jailward. He knew instantly who they were, and that, unless he killed the prisoners before help arrived, he'd never be able to boast of notching up for Clay Walcott and the Tuckers.

Denning clattered back to the cell-room, his face a pitiless mask. One after the other, he unlocked the three barred doors, pulling each wide open. But the prisoners did not step forth as he stood glittering-eyed, hands on hips.

"You wanted to get out!" Denning barked. "What's holdin' you now? Bunch of your friends comin' this way."

"That blast was to help us escape, eh?" Van Tucker's eyes narrowed. "We'll wait till they get here. You're plottin' to down us on the run, Denning!"

"You get the idea," the other showed his teeth viciously. "But you have a chance of beatin' my lead if you dodge quick, none if you stand still!"

Sid was looking at Tucker as he

spoke, and the sheriff grabbed up a stool. He hurled it at the killer's head, leaped from his cell as Denning was knocked sideways, reaching for hardware. He fired at the instant Clay's fist smote his gun-arm, jarring the Colt out of relaxed fingers.

Walcott rode him to the floor, with the cursing killer trying to get at his other smoke-iron. The Tuckers, offering no assistance, pelted for the jail office and, fully armed, appeared on the front steps as their gang pulled up before the calaboose with two horses.

Back in the cell-room, Clay arose from the quivering form of Denning, a smoking pistol in his hand. He had turned the muzzle against Sid as the killer unleathered the gun. Walcott heard the outlaws riding away, figured he'd better be riding himself as soon as he could find his horse.

There wasn't a chance now of his cleaning up the Tucker gang and winning that pardon. Toting Denning's six-shooters and a Winchester that Mel and Van had overlooked in the office, Clay stepped outside.

He was surprised to discover the Tucker longriders hadn't fled immediately. Taking advantage of the town's confusion, they had started plundering. Well, let 'em, Clay thought, scowling. He couldn't expect any help from the townsmen and they had treated him like a horse thief.

Then, with a sharp intake of breath, he observed Johnny running down the middle of the street, his aunt chasing him hopelessly. They were clearly visible in the glare of several burning houses which had caught fire after the explosion wrecked them.

Johnny heading for the jail, would, in the next few moments reach the smoky trench extending from one street side to the other, probably tumble in and break his neck. In addition, the boy and Selma were in danger of being killed at any instant by the reckless shooting of raiders and townsmen.

CLAY ran at top speed, skirted the hole in the street, and grabbed Johnny as he was pattering heedlessly to the brink of destruction. He swept the boy up in one arm.

"I was coming to find you!" cried Johnny, with large eyes on the sheriff's face. "I thought you were blowed up!"

"No, kid" — Clay stooped at the whine of a bullet close by—"but we've got to hunt cover. Aunt Selma, too."

Walcott saw the girl duck as he leaped to meet her, holding Johnny tightly.

"He slipped out of the house before I could catch him!" gasped the girl. "Oh, Walcott, can't you do something to stop this raid?"

"You want me to try? I was thinkin' only of gettin' you two to a safe place."

"You're still sheriff, in spite of what they did to you!"

Clay nodded grimly, his eyes darting in search of shelter. Selma kept pace with him as he hurried to the left, crossed the sidewalk to a wrecked structure which was not in flames. The girl and Johnny would be safer here than trying to run the gantlet of lead in the direction of Selma's cottage.

"Take him!" Clay thrust the boy into Selma's arms, and commenced pulling splintered boards about, making a hole in the debris into which all three crowded, crouching down.

Walcott laid the Winchester across broken timbers and scored on an outlaw dragging a small trunk from a house over the way. He felled another Tucker bandit, easily identifiable in the lurid flame-light, before the raiders realized a deadly marksman had entered the fray. A couple of outlaws hit the street running, their lead dislodging some of the boards piled in front of him, but Clay dropped them both.

The far side of the street seemed clear of raiders, but from the near side came the bandit brothers and the rest of the gang. Walcott turned flam-

ing rifle on the skulking figures scattered over the sidewalk. He stopped Mel dead in his tracks. Van sprang into the street, squatted, and proceeded to empty his Colt, yelling:

"We should've finished you at the jail, Clay!"

It was his last utterance, for a bullet struck him in the mouth. Walcott had pumped the seven shots in the Winchester, missed only once. As he jerked out Denning's notched pistols, citizens rallied to attack the remainder of the gang from the rear. The firing didn't slacken until the last bandit stumbled and chinned the dirt.

Clay, reloading the six-shooters, spoke to Selma:

"Reckon it's safe to see you and Johnny home. Then I'll be leavin' before the townsmen turn up my toes like them fellows out yonder. They think I threw in with the Tuckers."

"Surely," said Selma, "they can't think so now. If not for you the gang would have sacked the town."

"I ain't takin' any chances," replied Clay. "Except for this youngster," he laid a hand on Johnny's head, "I've got no friends."

"My brother, the Governor, is your friend," stated Selma. "And I'm your friend. I don't want you to leave."

He was staring at her when the voice of Hale, the stage agent, reached him, and he turned, hands falling to gun-butts. A bunch of townsmen were approaching the heap that had been a dwelling.

"I know you're there, Walcott," went on Hale, "for I saw you grab Johnny before he fell into that hole. We've changed our minds about you, Walcott. You've saved Sandstone a big loss tonight. And we know you were right in sayin' Petrey was the Tuckers' undercover man. He was seen runnin' before that blast let go. I shot him myself later. We'd like you to continue as sheriff."

"See," Selma said, "you have more friends than you counted on. And you've earned that pardon!"

Clay grinned, then called out:

"All right, Hale. As long as you want me, I'm sheriff."

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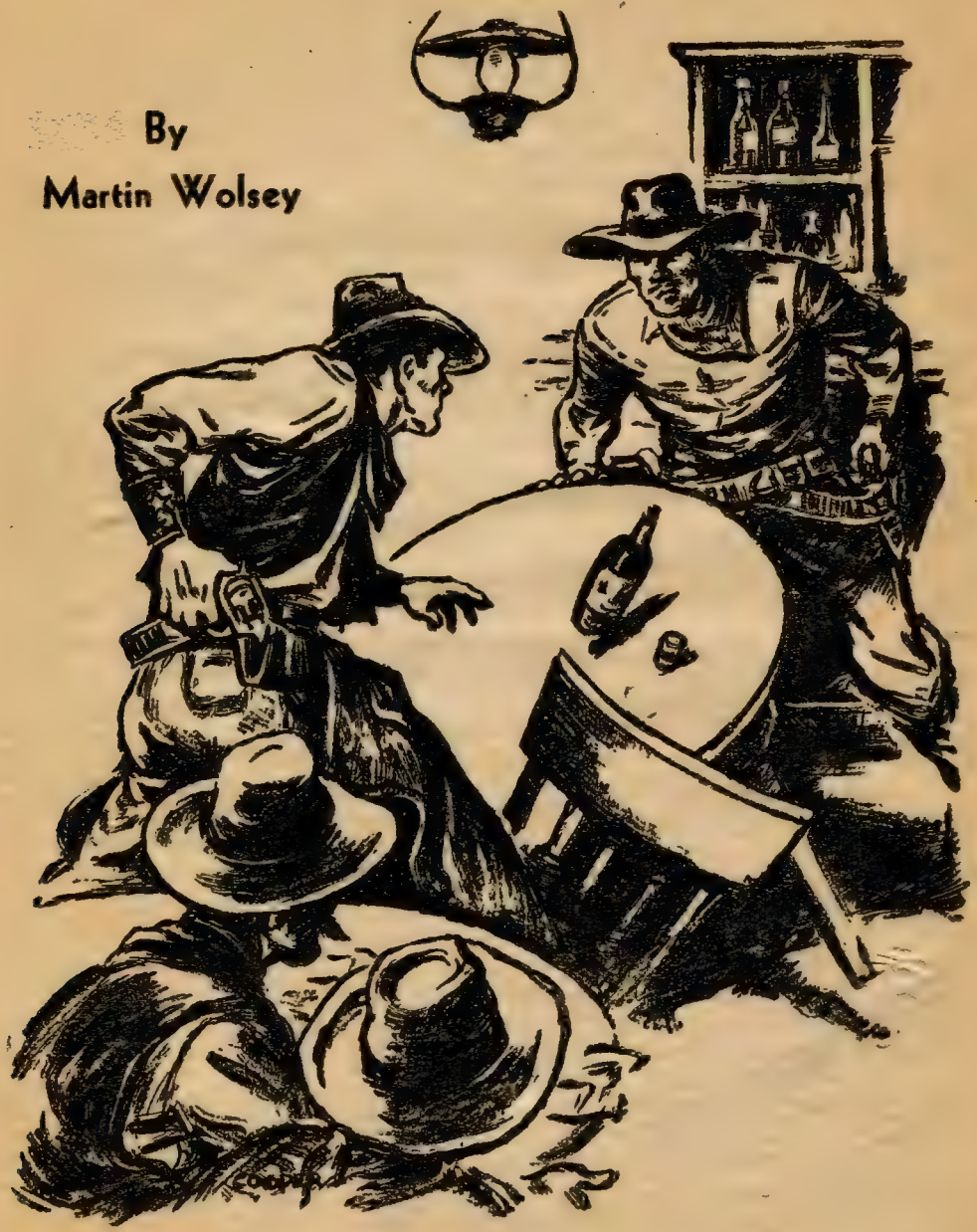
By
Martin Wolsey



When that boom town became a ghost town, Sheriff Stone had to swap live lead with phantom 45.'s.

TIM STONE knew just what he was stepping into when he accepted the tin star that made him sheriff of Eldorado. The badge made him responsible for a gold-crazy

boom town whose small population was increasing daily; whose inhabitants ranged from tenderfoot Easterners to desert rats and gunslicks. But most of all, the star made him a target of Ace Hoskins and his gang of gun-wolves who ran the Red Chip Gambling Saloon and terrorized Eldorado with wanton robbery and killing.

But it was one of Tim Stone's beliefs that no hombre was invincible and no town untamable. So he set out to restore law to Eldorado, come Colts or coffins. And to restore law meant either to run Ace Hoskins out of town or to salivate him.

That was a tall order. But knowing that sooner or later another shooting would crop up at the Red Chip, Tim kept his own men among the habitués of the saloon. They were not his regular deputies—Ace could have recognized those—but honest hombres who wanted to see the gambler in boot hill and whom Stone had secretly deputized.

One night it happened. A young cowpoke, who had come to Eldorado with the gold fever, accused Ace of stacking the cards in a poker game. The next minute the table was overturned and a brawl provoked. And the stranger, hardly more than a younker, was suddenly a limp heap with a bullet hole in his forehead. A little red chip was tossed at the corpse—the usual grim souvenir with which Ace tagged his killings.

"Self-defense," Ace had asserted blandly, as he had a dozen times before. The heads of the tinhorn's henchmen bobbed up and down in agreement. But the sheriff's men posted in the saloon claimed murder.

"I'm takin' you in for trial, Ace," young Sheriff Stone rapped.

"I'd like to see a tin-badge try," Ace sneered. His queer rabbit eyes under their red lashes glinted at the sheriff. He stood, legs apart, one hand pouring himself a whisky. He looked cold and deadly as a rattler.

Tim made a move forward. In a flash Ace whirled, his derringer spurting fire. But Stone's Colt roared the same instant, hardly seeming to clear leather. Ace collapsed to the floor, a sick, puzzled look on his face. His customers stood shock still. Their jaws dropped. They goggled at the gun magician who was swifter on the draw than even Ace Hoskins. They couldn't believe that the notorious tinhorn was dead.

ACE had left no pardner behind him clever enough or foolhardy enough to assume leadership of the tinhorn's gang. And Sheriff Stone felt proud that he had accomplished his mission—restored law to Eldorado.

He felt especially proud when Matt Stanton congratulated him. Matt was a popular man in town, owner of the little Citizens' Bank, recently mushroomed up to fill the needs of the booming town. He was tall, well-built, gray just beginning to streak his dark hair. He hailed the sheriff heartily as he saw him walking past the bank.

"Well, Stone," Matt Stanton drawled, "for a young lawman you've certainly proved your mettle." A good-humored smile spread over Matt's lips and laugh wrinkles showed around his eyes. "Town's pretty clean since you've been sheriff."

Tim's brown face couldn't hide its pride. Matt Stanton was Eldorado's leading citizen. He was rich and respected by everybody in town. As "honest as Matt Stanton" was a comparison often heard on a miner's tongue.

"Goin' to keep it clean, too," Tim answered.

"Do everythin' to help I can, Stone," the banker promised, and gave Tim a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Say now, how 'bout going down to the Red Chip for a—"

Matt never finished the invitation. The heavy thumping of hoofs drowned out his voice. A screen of dust blew up before the two men.

Without lighting from his bay, a perspiring, dust-covered rider began

jabbering at the sheriff. Tim recognized him—one of his ex-deputies.

"It's old man Hardy—Slim Hardy," the rider said breathlessly. "He's been drygulched! Jess and me went out to see him 'bout somethin', but he's dead—deader'n a ghost town!"

"Where's he at?" Tim interrupted, his face clouding with anger. He noticed Stanton beside him. His eyes had gone round with surprise.

"At his cabin. We didn't touch nothin'. We scorched right out here when we saw him. Jess went to your office. Who do you think done it?"

The sheriff didn't answer the question. His face set hard as concrete as he said crisply, "See you hombres later."

Stone swung up onto his big black hitched at the rail a few feet away from the bank. Then he sent it at a gallop eastward to Slim Hardy's cabin.

The lawman found the corpse sprawled out on the wooden floor. There was a small blood-clotted hole between the eyes—and a red chip lay on the dead miner's chest!

There had been no witnesses to the killing; no clues other than the little chip. Stone pocketed it, then forked his horse, and spurred him back to town. After informing the coroner about the body in Slim Hardy's shack, the sheriff strode down to the saloon.

A late afternoon pall hung lazily in the tobacco smoke and whisky-laden air of the Red Chip. Tim stepped up to the bar, pushed over a coin, and called for a drink. Sam Slade and "Wooly" Potter, two of Ace's old gang, eyed him warily.

Stone downed his rotgut, then silently threw the red chip on the bar. It spun a moment, clattered, then flattened out. The gunmen's eyes widened. Surprise creased their features.

"Hear Slim Hardy's struck a mother lode," the sheriff said.

WOOLY POTTER scratched a match on the mahogany bar. In the flickering glow of the flame he lifted his quirly, his green eyes glittering foxily.

"That so?" He blew a stream of blue-grey smoke toward the ceiling. His eyes didn't meet the lawman's.

"Seen Hardy lately?" Stone asked, flinging the chip on the bar.

"Nah. He's too busy with his diggin's," Sam Slade, the more talkative of the two, replied. "Ain't been in fer more'n a week."

"Not even for a game of poker?" Stone watched Wooly narrowly as he probed. The gunny's face was flintlike as he shook his head. But those green eyes of his looked as if they were secretly mocking the lawman, and a slight grin hung around his mouth.

"Reckon he'll be in tonight?" the sheriff pursued drily.

"Who knows?" Wooly growled. "Mebbe."

"If he does, it'll be a miracle," Tim Stone said shortly. "Slim Hardy's been drygulched."

The sheriff kept his eye peeled on the long, dusty mirror over the bar. He saw Slade jerk, his eyes pop like a frog's. Wooly, more controlled, rolled beady eyes toward the tin-star.

"Thought mebbe you hombres would know about this red chip we found on his body—"

"We don't know nothin', tin-badge," Slade gritted.

Wooly glowered silently, poured himself a drink, seemed too indifferent to the whole story.

Stone picked up the chip, flipped it as he strode from the bar. Over his shoulder he called harshly: "Hope so, for your sake." At the back of his mind, a suspicion of Wooly Potter's shiftiness gnawed.

The whole next day the young sheriff sat alone in his office figuring the Hardy bushwhacking. No witnesses—no clues, except a chip. He kept turning these facts over in his mind. Not a thing to work on.

It was past dusk, and the sheriff was still mulling over the killing. Shadows fell across his immobile face,

accentuating the high bronzed cheekbones, the lean jut of the jaw.

He started at a sudden, loud knocking at his door. Matthew Stanton burst into the office, his face excited, the veins pulsing in his neck.

"Sheriff—it's a killin'—again. Two of them this time. They got Tucker and Stacey of the Montana Mining—"

Stone spun from his seat. "Where?" he demanded.

"At their cabin. Same as Hardy. I went down there about a note they owed me—and—"

"C'mon," Tim cut in. Stanton led the way.

The sheriff found a red chip on each of the two corpses—and a bullet through each one's forehead. He found old Bowen, who lived next cabin to the salivated men, piping confusedly about ghost killers. The jasper's wife explained further.

"They were ghosts," she said frightenedly. "We seen 'em. All in white. Come tearin' down on them two poor critters. We heard 'em yell somethin' turrible. 'Ace Hoskins,' they yelled. I tell you it was Ace's ghost—Ace and his gunnies."

The lawman gave no credence to her story. But the two witnesses couldn't be dissuaded.

"Them red chips prove it," the oldster wheezed. "Them's Ace's souvenirs from boot hill!"

THE next few weeks saw panic and terror drag their bloody trails through Eldorado. Sheriff Stone was caught in their sweep; unable to get at the bottom of the murder epidemic; unable to squelch the rumor and superstitions that began to spread like a dust storm threatening Eldorado.

He figured the killers might be the remnants of Ace's gang, but so far he hadn't been able to arrest them. Since Ace's death, they had been pretty quiet and minded their own affairs. And possibly the drygulchers were part of the notorious Hooker gang of badmen, who rode the dim trails in the hills back of Eldorado. They were wanted dead or alive throughout the country; would kill for pleasure, and couldn't dare show their faces in town. But the killers were as swift and elusive as a cavvy of wild horses.

Each time the victim was a prospector who had hit pay dirt. But where the dirt had run yellow, it now ran red with blood. Yet no gold was ever stolen from the murdered man.

The red chip accompanying each killing made its point. Folks began to tie it up with Ace Hoskins' grim little jest. More and more witnesses claimed they saw white figures—ghost killers. "Eldorado's cursed," they cried. "Strike a vein and Ace's ghost will stalk you."

Families, alarmed and horror-stricken, began to migrate, push farther west. What was the use of prospecting, they asked. There was a curse on the gold of Eldorado. The streets began to look strangely deserted now. The busy atmosphere of a boom town had vanished. The mining camp seemed destined to become a ghost town.

Folks began to make demands of Sheriff Stone. What kind of a lawman was he, anyway? Matthew Stanton, representing the Citizens' Committee of Eldorado, gave Stone an ultimatum:

"Act or turn in your star."

"I'm doin' all I can," Stone replied. "I've rounded up as many as is willin', and I've posted them, one in front of each miner's home. I can't do more than that, Matt."

That night there wasn't a spot in town uncovered by a deputy. No man could get through the mesh of law that Sheriff Stone had thrown over Eldorado.

The town waited fearfully for the killers' next move. Nothing happened. The dread phantom gunmen did not appear. There was one killing, though—a strange one. Wooly Potter's body was found in a water barrel behind the saloon, a red chip clutched in his stiff fingers.

This development perplexed Stone. He'd been intending to arrest Wooly

and Ace's old gang, as a last resort—get them on some trumped-up charge. But now— Tim grew more determined than ever to get at the bottom of the mysterious killings.

The next night the deputized citizens took up their secret positions again, stationing themselves around town in brush and shadows. At midnight the phantom outlaws struck! Stone, out on patrol, saw them in the distance. So did a few of his deputies.

They were white figures, all right, and their horses seemed to fly under them. They were bearing down toward miner Tobin's cabin. Sheriff Stone spurred his horse over in that direction. He heard a gun roar followed by a yell of pain. They had got the deputy who had been posted in front of the shack. Stone roweled his horse. But before he came within gun range, the white figures were already emerging from the miner's home. He drew a bead and squeezed the trigger. The shot cracked the tense night air, was followed by a stifled gasp.

The ghosts disappeared momentarily in powdersmoke that hung before Stone's vision. Then followed the staccato rhythm of rapid hoofbeats. Tim fired after the retreating figures. He cursed, then cupping his hand to his lips, hallooed to his deputies nearby, rousing them to pursuit.

AN HOUR later, the band of deputies returned, worn out and disheartened. "Those ghost gunnies sure can ride," one of them panted. Among all the men, Sheriff Stone's face alone did not sag.

"We found something out tonight, pards," he remarked. "Those gunhawks are flesh and blood critters—not ghosts!"

He led the deputies over to Tobin's cabin. A few feet from the doorway, a track of blood started which led to approximately where the raiders' horses had been standing.

"My bullet must have tagged one of them as he was bolting out of the cabin. I heard one of them gasp as though he'd been hit."

Tim Stone's look swept around the deputies circling him. "I want you to spread what you've seen here, boys. Everybody in Eldorado must savvy we're fightin' *men*—gun-wolves not ghosts."

They grasped his point. One of the deputies, Kerry, said: "You're right, sheriff. Ghosts don't bleed."

"Tomorrow noon," Sheriff Stone ordered, "meet me in the back room of the Bonanza Hotel." A hopeful glint had come back into his eyes. "Get word around to everyone you trust to be there. Gonna be sort of a secret town meetin', do you understand? That's all."

The deputies dispersed. Lawman Stone stood staring thoughtfully out at their diminishing figures. Then he turned around, stepped into Tobin's cabin. On the floor, the moon throwing a ghostly pattern on his blood-stained face, lay old prospector Tobin. On his chest lay the inevitable little red chip.

At about noon the next day, numbers of serious-faced Eldorado citizens began to file casually through the deserted lobby of the Bonanza into a large room at the rear. Among them were the men Sheriff Stone had deputized, most of the miners who hadn't as yet fled from Eldorado, one or two of the town's businessmen and Matt Stanton.

They ceased buzzing among themselves when the sheriff appeared and stepped out in front to address them. Sheriff Stone made a swift scrutiny of the faces in the group. He identified everyone, then he quickly got to his point.

"Last night we found that the ghost drygulchers are not ghosts at all. Some of us suspected as much from the start. But what we didn't savvy was why the bushwhackin' was bein' carried on. Now here's what I figure. Someone *wants* to make a ghost town out of Eldorado—has been purposely throwin' a scare into the miners so

that they'll git. I ain't sure just why. But mebbe these coyotes figure they can scare everybody out of town, wipe out the few folks that's left, and take over the claims for themselves. I ain't sure, but that's how I figure."

The men started whispering again among themselves. Stone could see they made sense out of what he'd said.

"Sounds like the truth," Matt Stanton called out. The others began to voice their agreement.

The sheriff motioned for silence. "I figure we got to play right in with the killers' plans. We got to let them think they're really making this a ghost town, pretend we're vamoosing and let them come on in."

"How are you going to do it?" one of the prospectors quizzed.

"This is how. We're gonna make believe we're all leaving," the young lawman answered. "Pack saddlebags and look as though we're pulling freight—stay away awhile, and then steal back in before night falls and wait."

"Pretty troublesome, ain't it?" Stanton asked through the smoke of his quirly. "I'll have to shut down the bank."

OTHERS began to raise objections. The crowd babbled, some for and some against the sheriff. Tim Stone's voice cut through the noise:

"We can't let these killers drive us from our town. And the only way we can keep them from doin' it is by leaving town. That may sound loco, but it's true!"

"It's loco, all right," said Slade, owner of the Red Chip. "Besides, how do you know it'll work? It's only a hunch." This remark called forth bickering cross-discussion. Those who sided the sheriff began to falter. The hubbub of voices grew louder.

This time Tim's voice rose more harshly and emphatically. "It's the only plan we got. Any of you got a better one?" There was a sudden silence. "All right, then," the lawman snapped. "Now, if any of you hombres are too yellow or too lazy to—"

The group shouted indignant denials. Voices started acclaiming here and there, "I'm with you, Stone," and "You can count on me, sheriff."

Tim turned to the banker. He knew his words carried weight. "You in on it, Stanton?"

"Well—if the others agree, I'll join," he stated. The scheme was finally agreed upon.

The sheriff then began to give more explicit directions. He ordered that word of the plan be spread around quietly to the remainder of the small population. Each man was assigned to a specified position in the town, from which he could shoot at the outlaws. The exact time for the attack was settled upon.

Tim Stone went around tense and troubled for the next few days. If the project fell through, his star and his pride were lost. And most important, his duty to the citizens of Eldorado would remain unfulfilled.

But everything went according to schedule. The deputies and the miners and their families packed their things, padded their saddlebags and buckboards until they looked as if they were really starting a mass migration. Leaving town in a cavalcade, they took to the hills a few miles outside of Eldorado. No one stayed behind. Slade and the two remaining members of Ace's old gang were also a part of the fake exodus. Anyone who stayed behind would have immediately been tagged.

Sheriff Stone was gratified to see the fine spirit with which the inhabitants were carrying out his scheme. Voluntarily, they went about making Eldorado a ghost town.

At seven o'clock, when twilight had thrown its purple shadows over Eldorado, the sparse population began creeping carefully back into town. Under cover of darkness, they noiselessly took up their appointed gun-posts.

Eldorado really looked like a ghost town. A strained silence hung in the fronted buildings, blacked out, looked air. In the bright moonlight, the false-

like cardboard cut-outs; the stores like painted props on a stage.

But to Sheriff Stone the scene was neither unreal nor dead. He knew that at any moment a gang of heartless murderers would invade it—and murder had a bitter, vivid reality about it. He felt the pulses pounding at his temples and and his wrists, and his nerves were raw.

Suddenly, his whole body went taut as a stretched bow. His ear caught the drumming of horses' hoofs. Involuntarily, his fingers sought the black butt of his Colt.

Minutes dragged by, and the galloping din hammered at Stone's eardrums. A band of white-clad riders shot by his hiding place down the empty main street. After continuing on down the street a way, Tim saw their leader reining in.

THE white-clad figures stopped. Evidently the plan was working. In the belief that they had finally made a ghost town of Eldorado, the riders were now easing out of saddles, hitching their horses and preparing to take over.

Stone itched to start pumping lead at the nightshirt raiders. From where he was he could have opened a withering blast. But he held his fire and delayed signaling his pardners to see what the drygulchers intended.

As the sheriff watched, a puzzled expression creased his face. His eyes narrowed, and strange realization burned into his mind like a hot brand. The killers were spreading out—taking up covered positions, each outlaw counterflanking one of the sheriff's men. This was no guesswork. These coyotes knew just where to station themselves. Someone in Eldorado—someone in on the whole plan—had tipped them off.

That was why they hadn't shown up that first night Stone had begun posting his men around town. And that was why they always knew just which prospector had struck pay dirt. But who?

Sheriff Stone's thoughts were broken by the percussive crack of a rifle. Answering flame spurted from one of his deputies' guns. A return shot roared. Then all hell seemed to break loose. The night became a crazy pattern of orange and yellow flames, vanishing into grey thickening smoke. From all sides bullets spouted, whined like live things. The raiders smashed out a steady fusillade of hot lead, pounded unceasingly at the sheriff and his men.

The muzzle of Stone's Colt yammered. He'd dropped two of the white-clad horsemen before reloading. Then in a split second, a battery of well-aimed pellets crashed from his shooting-iron. He thought of all those murdered miners as he swiftly aimed his Colt at the white figures. Lead hurtled through the murky air.

Someone gasped beside Tim. He glimpsed Kerry, his deputy, who twitched convulsively, then suddenly fell lifeless. He turned toward him. A slug whizzed past close to his ear. Tim jumped behind a buckboard, rested his gun in the wheel's spokes.

There was a moment's silence. The first lead scrimmage seemed over. The moonlight illuminated a bloody street. Here and there, the immobile grotesque arm or leg of a dead man protruded.

A raider moved, then ducked as a shot rattled toward him. The gunplay quieted down. The remaining men on each side were firing only pot shots now, sniping from behind barrels and carts. It was a matter now of who could hold out longer—who had more ammunition and more stamina. The sides seemed about even. Around ten of the sheriff's men were still fighting.

Tim hunched down on all fours, started crawling closer to the raiders, toward a fallen signboard a few feet away. He suddenly heard his name called in a whisper.

"Stone, Stone!" the voiced gasped. "Help me—I've been tagged!"

The sheriff caught sight of Matt

Stanton a few feet beyond the signboard. He was on his knees, hands cupped over his chest, hidden behind a water barrel near the Red Chip.

Stone's thoughts swirled. He'd have to get the banker into the saloon, let him rest there till the gun battle was over.

TIM moved as quickly as possible. He accidentally overturned a bottle that was lying on the ground. An instant later, lead flew so close to his cheek that he could feel its heat. He flattened, crawled till he reached the banker.

"Help me," Stanton panted.

"Here, throw your arm around my shoulder," Tim ordered. In the darkness he couldn't see Matt's face. He pulled the heavy man to his feet, almost carried him into the saloon. Then he plopped Matt down on a seat.

The moonlight poured in through the wide window of the barroom. It streamed brightly on Matt Stanton.

The lawman shook his head. He thought the moon's glow must have distorted his vision. He looked again, stared into the muzzle of Matt Stanton's six-shooter.

Tim Stone didn't recognize the face that confronted him. The banker's eyes glared like a cougar's. His fleshy mouth, usually smiling, was a white, cruel line. In the moonlight, Tim saw that there wasn't a bruise on him.

"Keep 'em up," Stanton warned, then added, "sheriff," sarcastically. "What a sad end for all your well-laid plans," he needled.

Stone didn't reply. Shock paralyzed his tongue. He thought the whole thing a joke—maybe a figment of his imagination.

"Surprised?" Stanton went on mockingly. "Certainly, you are. I'm no fool, Stone. When I do something, I do it with all the trimmings. Those two gangs out there will salivate each other till there's no one left of them. I'll finish you personally. Then I can work those mines in town. I'll get back all the gold I lost to Ace, and much more—all the gold that's not in the bank where it should be."

Tim stared at the banker as at someone loco. The realization that it was this devil and his hirelings who had killed so many of Eldorado's citizens finally penetrated his stunned mind.

"You dirty coyote," he raged.

"Easy, star-toter. Just a little pressure from my restless finger, and pop—" he snapped his finger casually —"you'll do your sheriffin' in boot hill." His grin was ghastly in the moonlight.

"Fooled you though. Fooled the whole pack of sheep in town," he jeered. "Thought it was Ace Hoskins' ghost come back. That's why I threw in that red chip. Scared 'em all out of town, all right. Wooly got those chips for me. Used to pick 'em up at the saloon. Poor Wooly! He did such a good job on old Slim Hardy. It's a pity I had to kill him. But he was the only man in Eldorado who knew I was the leader of those ghost riders. He, and now you—"

Matt Stanton sprang up out of his seat, his gun leveled at Tim's heart. The sheriff's mind raced. Stanton's face and the muzzle of his six-shooter seemed to loom gigantically before him. He knew now how cheap life was to Stanton. He lunged for the banker's knees. The six-gun barked. A slug grazed the lawman's back as the banker buckled under him.

They rolled over. Tim wrenched the gun from Stanton's hand, then straddled him. The banker's fingers reached, dug into Tim's throat. Almost two hundred pounds were behind those stubby fingers that clawed into his neck. Tim gasped for breath. His brain dizzied.

With a convulsive effort, he shot his hand out and stiff-armed Stanton, breaking the stranglehold. The bodies rolled apart. Stanton tried to scramble to his feet, but Tim was quicker, and made a swift dive for him. For a moment both men fought for balance. Then as each tried to gain

the advantage, Tim drove a pile-driving fist into Stanton's beefy midriff. Almost simultaneously the banker's leg jackknifed up, aimed brutally at the sheriff's stomach.

As Tim's punch landed Stanton gasped for air. Then he reeled back, hit his head against the brass footrail of the bar as he slumped. The sheriff, doubling with the pain in his stomach, clutched at the bar for support. He saw the other go down through his swimming vision. Tim fought to clear his head before Stanton came to.

Gritting his teeth, Stone lurched towards the banker's clumsily rising figure. He bore down on him, flattened him on the floor, and straddled him.

The lawman smashed his fist into Stanton's face—again and again. The puffy countenance deflated like a burst balloon, then choked, "Enough!"

Tim drew the killer to his wobbly feet, stood behind him, his Colt ramming Stanton's ribs. He shoved him to the door. Outside stray shots still flew.

STONE whistled softly to two of his deputies. They slunk stealthily over to the saloon door. He whispered something into their ears, his gun still prodding Stanton. The two deputies' faces broke into a wide grin. As they left, Stone called after them: "Spread it around to the other boys."

"Now," he said, turning to Stanton, "we'll finish you up. Call to your men. Tell them my side has been knocked out and is surrendering, that the town is theirs. Order them to step forward and put down their artillery. There's no need for further shooting."

"Okay, then," said Stone, and the banker heard a little ominous click as the sheriff cocked the trigger of his Colt. "I done in Ace Hoskins and I'll do the same to you, coyote."

Stanton saw that the sheriff was not bluffing. He felt the cold steel pressing into the small of his back. Suddenly he broke. "Don't shoot," he croaked. "I'll tell them."

"And no tricks," Tim warned him.

The banker stepped forward and gave the command to his gunmen in a loud, but not too steady voice. As the last word left his lips, the air suddenly became quiet. For a full minute not a sound was heard. Evidently, Stanton's command didn't make sense to his men.

Tim sized up the situation. His gun jabbed emphatically at Stanton. "Say it again," he ordered. "Louder!"

Stanton unwillingly bawled forth, "It's all right, I tell you, men. You can come out."

The first white figure loomed out of the darkness. The others followed reluctantly. The sheriff's men who had been listening carefully to all this, and knew just what it signified, suddenly sprang from their hiding places. The leader boomed: "All right, you polecats, we got the drop on you. Reach!"

For a second the gunmen looked bewildered. They were too stunned to move. Then two of them dove for their guns. Two shots flared from the ring of deputies, and the gunhawks sagged like sacks of flour. None of the others reached for leather after that.

"Okay, pards," Stone called out. "Relieve them of their hardware."

After the surrounded men had been stripped of their firearms, Stone pitched the sullen, fist-marked banker out into their midst.

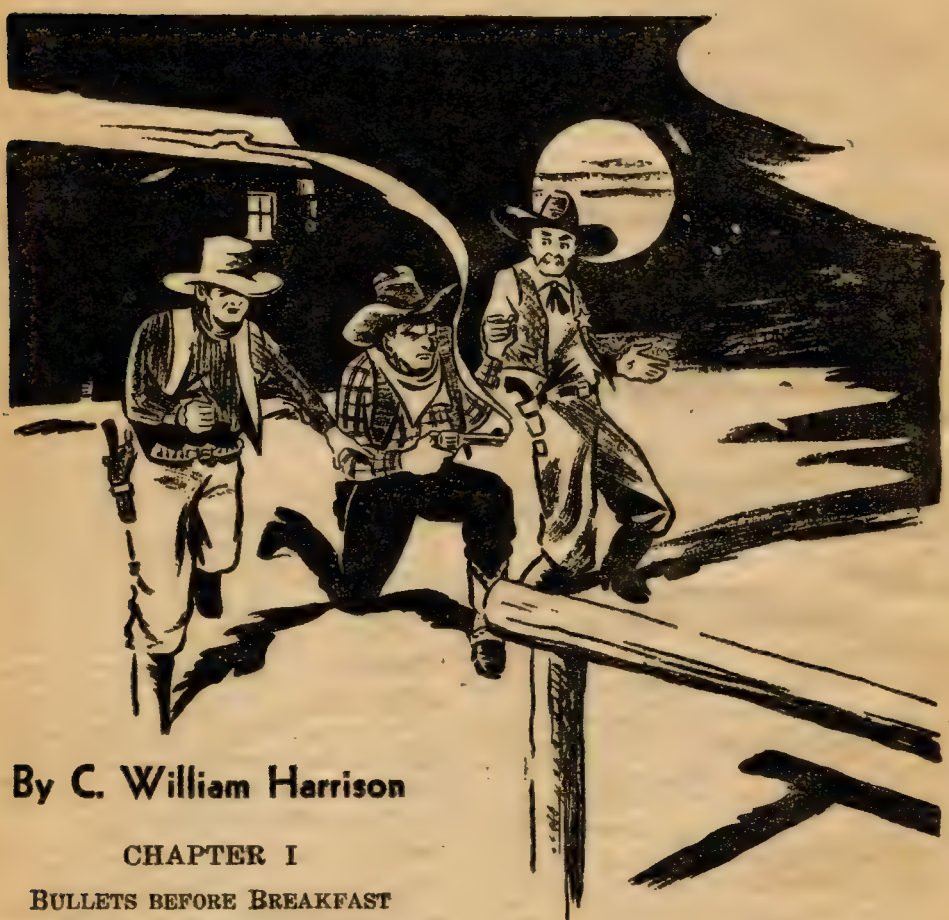
"Now we'll hogtie 'em," Tim jeered. "For a ghost town, Eldorado's sure got a fine, up-to-date calaboose waiting for you lobos. And," the lawman added, scrutinizing the faces of the killers, "looks like you deputies are in for a right big reward. These are the notorious Hooker crew—fastest riders and sharpest shooters on the owlhoot trail. They'll hire out to anyone. Guess Stanton paid 'em plenty in dinero. But he knew they were expert gunmen."

"They were—" grinned a deputy.

"Yeah," answered Stone, as they started marching the prisoners to the nearby adobe jailhouse. "When the law finishes with them, I reckon they'll *really* be ghost killers!"

Colt Mission for a

Unusual Western Novelette



By C. William Harrison

CHAPTER I

BULLETS BEFORE BREAKFAST

IN THE gray half-light of early dawn, Rusty Shane and Sixty Jones saw it all happen. They had just broken up camp in the rocky arroyo, and while Rusty Shane rolled their blankets and saddled their horses, Sixty Jones made substitute coffee out of burnt bread boiled in water.

"If we wasn't flat broke, we could have some real coffee," Sixty said. He was a short fat man with a perpetually moody face.

"Just close your eyes and imagine you're drinkin' the genuine," Rusty Shane drawled easily.

"I used up my imagination last night tryin' to make myself think that last piece of hardtack was a cow steak," the fat man growled.

Rusty Shane grinned. He was tall as a rail, and built along the same general lines. He wore the slant-heeled boots and jeans and wide hat of a range rider, but his long hands

Peaceful Hombre

Although that sagebrush salesman, Rusty Shane, could talk the range folks into buying all kinds of gadgets, he was hogtied when he tried pistol palaver to sell justice to a couple of cowtown killers.

showed little signs of hard work. They were smooth and soft. His face, angular and unhandsome as it was, reflected undying optimism.

"We'd had plenty of money if that store owner in Brazos hadn't canceled his check on me," he said cheerfully.

Sixty Jones grunted acidly. "Can't say I blame him. There won't nothin' grow around Brazos but kids and

cows. What would he want with ten tons of fertilizer you almost sold him?"

"It might have come in handy." The tall redhead was unruffled. "You got to admit it was a good job of talkin'."

The fat man scowled glumly. "If you'd stop bein' a salesman, and take a job of work—"

"Work sours the soul."

"It fattens the flesh," Sixty Jones brooded.

They kicked dirt over the campfire, mounted, and rode out of the arroyo. It was then that they saw it. From the rim of the arroyo, the range curved down in a broad, shallow basin. The low trail of dust they saw was nearly a mile away, faint through the early morning haze, and near the trackless wastes of a badland.

Rusty Shane stood up in his stirrups, frowning slightly. "No honest punchers would be drivin' cattle into them badlands," he said grimly. "They're rustlers as shore as I wear long britches."

Grim interest brightened Sixty Jones' gray eyes. "If we caught them, maybe we'd get paid the price of a grubstake," he said hopefully. "We'll have to ride! Once they get in that badland, they'll be harder to find than fleas on a preacher."

They tried to overtake the rustlers in time, but they didn't have a chance. The land was rough, studded with rocks, choked with cactus thickets that clawed spiny fingers at them as they crashed through. For a fat man who claimed interest only in peace and comfort, Sixty Jones now betrayed the hard core of toughness that was in him.

THEY were still half a mile from the rustlers when Jones, riding a horse length ahead of Rusty Shane, suddenly sheered his mount wildly to one side. His warning came in a piercing yell.

"Look out! Gulch here!"

Even as Shane pulled rein, hoofs screeching in the gravelly earth, he saw Sixty's horse balancing precariously on the rim of a gulch that had been hidden by the thick sage. Then the rim of the gulch broke loose, plunging horse and rider into the depths. Gray-brown dust billowed up, and Rusty Shane yelled:

"Sixty! You all right?"

The gulch was no more than twenty feet deep, steep-walled and arid. Sixty Jones' healthy cursing bit through the settling dust.

"Sure I'm all right! My hoss rode the slide down. Lots of times we ride out in the middle of the night just to do this. Stop askin' fool questions, and tell me which way is out. I can't see a thing through the dust."

To the north the walls of the gulch were sheer and insurmountable, but in the opposite direction they seemed to flatten out.

"Ride south," Shane ordered. He could make out the fat man's shape now, a dust-darkened figure still in the saddle. "To your left, Sixty!"

Rusty Shane used five minutes finding a place where he could drop into the gulch and climb the far wall. When they were in the open again, the cattle and rustlers were no longer in sight.

"There goes our chance for a grubstake," the fat man groaned. "And I'm hungrier than a woodpecker with a headache."

"All you were thinking of was a fight," Shane said drily.

They picked up the trail of the rustlers and stolen cattle where it slanted into the badlands. Here the land was raw and ugly. Cactus-clogged slash valleys twisted in a tangled maze among rocky spires and erosion-scarred hills.

It was a place as dangerous as it was ugly, trackless and waterless. A man could get lost a quarter mile inside that bad land, and spend days finding his way out—if he lived to get out. In there, thirst and heat were as deadly as the fangs of a rattlesnake.

At the end of the first hundred yards, Rusty Shane knew they had no

chance of tracking down the rustlers; already the trail was beginning to fade on the rocks and malpais. They halted, hoping to get the direction from some sound of the stolen cattle. But all they heard was the harsh rasp of the voice behind them.

"Reach, you two!"

Rusty Shane's hands jerked up, and a chill glint narrowed his hard brown eyes.

The voice came again, bleak and bitter. "Make a funny move, and I'll blow you to pieces!"

The pressure of Shane's knee turned his mount slowly on the narrow trail. Recognition hit him as he saw the shoestring rancher to whom he had sold an order of rock salt the year before.

"So it's you!" the rancher grated. "I knew someone was followin' me, but I didn't know it was you workin' with them rustlers. Keep your hands high, Shane!"

Rusty Shane smiled faintly. "You're making a mistake, Walling."

"I don't make a mistake when I find two polecats guardin' the trail of a bunch of cattle rustled from me."

"You danged fool—" Sixty Jones began.

"We were trying to catch those rustlers, not help them," Rusty Shane said easily. He saw doubt edge into the rancher's bitter eyes. "We were camped a mile or so from here when we saw them movin' cattle into the badlands. We thought we could head them off and do you a turn."

THE rancher was bleakly stubborn. "I saw them rustlers drivin' off my cattle an hour ago. It ain't the first time it's happened. I thought I could trail them to their hideout, then bring in the law." Walling's knuckles were white around the butt of his gun. "I saw someone trailin' me in here."

Shane shrugged flat shoulders. "It wasn't us. I'm givin' it to you straight, Walling. We came here from the east, and if you want to backtrack us—"

"The gent I saw followed me from my ranch house, to the south," Walling said flatly.

A nameless presentiment of danger pulled at Rusty Shane's nerves. He looked for it—a quick, sharp glance—but he couldn't see it. The barren hills and rocky spires of the badland limited his vision to a few short rods. But there were a dozen places where a killer could be waiting, hidden.

"If it wasn't you I saw, then I've got an idea who it was," the rancher bit out grimly. "There's a gent in town I used to know back in Texas, under a different name. I don't get to town often, and I saw him the first time the other day. He pulled off some crooked deals in Texas that he wouldn't want me to talk about. I've got a hunch the gent followin' me was—"

Murder struck then.

Sixty Jones yelled, "Behind you, Walling!"

Rusty Shane saw the man that same instant, masked and vague through the thick brush that choked the trail. He saw the gun in the killer's hand, and he saw the rancher try to spin away from the danger behind him. It was a futile movement.

The killer's gun crashed, two shots that blended into one. The impact of the heavy slugs seemed to lift Walling bodily into the air, hurl him back and down.

The throw of Rusty Shane's gun was a blue blur in the white glare of the morning sun. He fired as his weapon swept up, knew instantly that he had pulled the trigger too soon. His slug was low, too low. He saw the killer, dodging back through the rocks, jerk one foot as though he had stepped on a hot iron. Then the man was no longer in sight.

Shane yelled to Sixty Jones. "Look after Walling!"

He kicked his horse into a reckless run down the rocky defile. He veered into the side cut the murderer had used, but he saw no sign of the man. Shane cursed harshly.

He halted his horse, listening in-

tently. He heard the clatter of running hoofs striking rock, and sent his mount plunging in that direction. In that tangled wasteland, it was impossible to ride in a straight line. He bent around rocky domes, threaded through erosion slashes, but he didn't see his man. He halted again, hunting for sound of the killer's flight to guide him. He heard nothing. The killer was gone.

Sixty Jones was standing over the rancher's body when Rusty Shane returned. One glance was enough to tell Shane there was no life left in Walling's lax body. The bullets had struck him as he spun, smashing into his left side and through his heart. He never knew what hit him.

"So he got away!" the fat man grated.

Shane nodded. "We'll leave Walling at his ranch house for the coroner," he said quietly. "It's best that way."

Trouble was in Shane's dark eyes as they rode out of the badlands.

CHAPTER II

Holster Headlines

WHATEVER could be said about Rusty Shane, it was not that he lacked ambition. He might shun the sweat and labor of ranch work like poison, but he had a brain and a tongue that wouldn't quit.

Rusty would, his partner Sixty Jones claimed, try to sell thermometers in hades, if it would help him avoid harder work.

Hazardville looked much the same as when they had seen the town last. The old boundaries were the same, and there were no new buildings that they remembered. The posts and rails of the shipping pens at the edge of town seemed in a poorer state of repair than before. Sixty Jones noticed this, and said glumly:

"Judgin' from the condition of them shipping pens, we won't find much money in this town."

If there was any worry in Rusty Shane, he didn't show it. Only in the faint hard lines of his mouth did he give hint to the bleak run of his thoughts.

"There's always money for the gent who can sell things," he drawled. "We'll clean up when I start sellin' my new product."

"I still got my hunch," Sixty Jones said gloomily.

They would, Rusty decided, wait awhile before notifying the sheriff about the murder of the rancher.

"That mail order course in sleuthing I used to sell said you got more chance of catchin' a crook if you can keep him guessing," Shane said. "The killer won't know what to think when we keep still about Walling's murder."

"We'll end up in trouble for withholdin' information from the law," the fat man growled.

They rode into town on trail-dusty horses with the hot glare of the noon sun slanting down on their backs. They reined in and dismounted in front of the hotel. It was Saturday noon, and the hitchrails were already filled with the horses of punchers and ranchers.

"What comes first?" asked Sixty Jones.

"You might register us a room in the hotel."

"And what will I use for money?" the fat man wanted to know.

Rusty Shane shrugged off that minor detail. He was speculatively eyeing the flare-fronted building whose sign read: *Martin Rand & Company, Gen'l Mdse.* He was wondering if, in spite of the murder that haunted his mind, it was a good time to start selling.

"I'm jumpy from that killing, and I got twenty miles of real estate in my mouth," Sixty Jones brooded. "I could stand a drink—"

"Go get it," Shane said absently.

"If I had the price," the fat man finished.

IT WAS then that the man called them from the door of the general store. Rusty Shane angled across the

street to the manager of the store. Anger was in the man's face, but Shane gave no evidence of seeing it.

"How's business, Mr. Ackers?"

"Business is why I called you over here," Ackers snapped. "Remember when you were here last year?"

Shane nodded calmly. He glanced at the tracks the store manager had made in the dust on the plank walk. He didn't see what he was looking for. He hadn't expected to.

"Uh-huh, but I'm selling a different product now," Shane said. "It's a pedometer, tells how far you walk. Greatest money-maker put on the market since whisky. You ought to have some, Mr. Ackers—"

"It's paper flowers I called you over about," the store manager broke in. "You sold me fifty gross last year, and I've got the devil from Mr. Rand for it ever since."

Shane rubbed his bony jaw thoughtfully. "Everybody likes flowers."

"That's what you said last year," Ackers said angrily. "I thought I could sell them to the undertaker, but I didn't know you'd already sold him a wagonload. He's sore as blazes. He thought he could sell what he bought around the county, then found out you'd loaded every ranch house inside forty miles."

"They were mighty pretty flowers," Rusty Shane remembered. There was, he noted, a nice traffic of punchers and ranch folks into the general store at this hour. It would be a good time, before the news of Walling's murder tore things wide open, to introduce his new product to the customers of Hazardville. He took a small watchlike instrument from a pocket in his jeans. "What you need is a few dozen of the pedometers I'm sellin'—"

"Pedometers be hanged!" Ackers exploded. "Ain't I got enough worries with all them artificial flowers you sold me? And what about that gross of bow and arrow outfits you sold me year before last? I still got all but one set, and if I hadn't caught Crazy Ike Sommers one day when he was a little crazier than usual I wouldn't have sold none at all. Why I ever bought them bows and arrows—" Curiosity simmered down his anger. "You say that dohink sure enough measures how far a man walks?"

"All the way up to a hundred miles," Rusty Shane said. "Greatest thing ever hit the market, Mr. Ackers." He rubbed his jaw, and thought a moment. "Tell you what, Ackers. You drag out a bunch of them bow and arrow sets, and I'll show you how to do it. Half a gross of these pedometers ought to be enough for you this order, don't you think?"

"Well, now—"

AN HOUR later, Sheriff Sam Thorne came out of his jail office. It was hot, and he had just finished his after-meal nap. He nodded to the townsmen and punchers he saw on the street, then frowned confusedly, and knuckled his eyes. When he looked again, he saw the same thing. It seemed every other man on the street was carrying a bow and quiver of arrows. Thorne grabbed the arm of a puncher trudging by with a bow and arrow outfit in one hand.

The sheriff blurted, "What in thunder is goin' on here, Toby? Is everyone turnin' Injun? What are you doin' with that shoot and stick outfit?"

The puncher's weather-reddened face showed hardgripped anger. "It might come in handy," he growled defensively.

"Might come in handy—that bow and arrow set?" Sheriff Thorne echoed hollowly.

"That's what the redheaded gent in Rand's store said!" Then the puncher's temper took a vicious flare. "Hell, I didn't want this outfit! I got a six-shooter, but I nosed into that crowd in Rand's store, and there was this redheaded jigger sellin' bows and arrows. Fust thing I knowed I bought—" The puncher cursed savagely. "Get out of my way, sheriff! I'm gettin' myself good and drunk!"

Recognition sank into Sheriff

Thorne's brain. "Rusty Shane!" he muttered harshly. Then he spun on his heels, and yelled to his deputy inside the jail office. "Joe! Ride out to Willow Springs and get Pinky Traille. That red-haired salesman is in town again, and there'll be trouble shore as hell!"

When he had finished his work at the general store, Rusty Shane pocketed the commissions he had earned. Then he carefully filed away Mr. Ackers' order for six gross of pedometers.

"You don't have to work for a living, if you can talk the right words," he grinned at Sixty Jones.

"Next year Ackers will climb your frame for them fool walk-watches you sold him," the fat man growled. "Talk means trouble whether it's done in words or printin'. Take a look at this newspaper I bought, and you'll know what I mean."

The headlines of the weekly newspaper, just off the press, read:

PISTOLS OR FREE PRESS?

The editor of the *Free Speech* has long been asking Hazardville citizens this question. The time has come for us to find the answer. Are we to have a newspaper which can write the truth regardless of who it hurts? Or are we to be threatened out of our constitutional right by the pistols of the hard-case men who loaf around a certain saloon in town, namely Gus Wiggin's Blue Bottle establishment?

The time has come when we, as free and honest citizens, must rid ourselves of gunmen, knife artists, drunk rollers, road bandits, and other characters of the same lawless breed who inhabit the Blue Bottle Saloon. . . .

There was a strange glint of grim speculation in Rusty Shane's hard eyes, something both dangerous and shrewd.

He murmured, "That editor ought to be a good prospect for some life insurance. The way his paper reads, he'll need some."

Icy mirth tipped the corners of Sixty Jones' mouth. "You're just itchin' to buy into someone else's fight, and keepin' quiet about Walling's murder is a good down payment," he growled. "If anyone needs insurance, it's you."

THERE was a rising current of tension drawing in the nerves of the town. Rusty Shane and Sixty Jones could feel it, as they had their meal in the town's restaurant.

"This town has been cocked and ready to explode ever since that newspaper came out," the fat man grumbled as they drifted out on the street again.

It was nothing that Rusty Shane didn't know. As he paused in the thin shade of the restaurant's broad awning his eyes were cool and restless. He studied the grim, almost sullen faces of the cattlemen gathered here and there along the street. Poverty was the key to those men, that and something close to bitter defeat. Shane caught snatches of conversation from two passing ranchers.

"What chance would we have cleanin' out that bunch of gunslicks in Wiggin's saloon? All the ranchers are scared to get together against that gang."

"We're licked, if we don't," the second cowman said heavily. "I had another hundred head of cattle rustled last week. That mean I'll have to borrow again from Martin Rand."

"I already got next season's calf crop mortgaged to Rand. But the way things have been goin' I won't be able to even pay him the interest on my note."

The men trudged on. Rusty Shane frowned thoughtfully, his eyes studying the prints each passing man left in the dust on the plank walk. Martin Rand, it seemed, had been extending credit to the county ranchers in order to keep them in business. But with rustlers constantly draining the cattle herds, the ranchers had little hope of meeting their debts.

Sheriff Sam Thorne stalked up, followed by his two deputies, Joe Crain and Pinky Traille. The sheriff's voice was blunt and truculent.

"I been lookin' for you, Shane. Last time you were here three men got killed because you nosed into something that was none of your business. I don't want you stirrin' up trouble again."

Shane's smile was cool and unruffled. "You got to admit those three men were runnin' crooked card games," he reminded. "They got what they had comin'."

"Mebbe so," the sheriff growled. "But I know what's on your mind now, and I don't like it. You've been readin' Judson Daine's news editorial in the *Free Speech*, and it's a lot of hot air. He's got no proof against the crowd in Wiggin's saloon, and all he'll get out of this write-up is trouble."

"It shore looks that way," Shane drawled. He studied the tracks left in the dust by three passing punchers. He didn't see what he wanted to see.

"What are you watchin' tracks for?" the sheriff asked grimly.

Rusty Shane grinned thinly. "I got an idea," he confided. "Notice how that rag rug on the restaurant step has been worn by bein' walked on? I figure if that rug was made out of leather, and gents' boots were soled with cloth, then rugs wouldn't wear out so quick."

Sheriff Thorne spat his disgust. "Another thing I wanted to see you about is them six silk shirts you sold me last year. Every one of 'em shrunk four sizes when they was washed. I wore one to a dance, and the colors run on me when I got sweaty. I like to never got that dye washed off of me."

Shane frowned gravely. He looked at Pinky Traille.

Traille grated, "Don't look at me. I don't want them."

"They can't shrink any more," Shane argued, "and you'd have six shirts that couldn't be matched anywhere for color. A man ought to be individual in his clothes, Pinky. It makes him stand out in a crowd."

When he had finished, Shane had fifteen dollars of the deputy's money. Besides, he had sold the sheriff a volume of the *Lawman's Handbook* which, as he said, "couldn't be beat for teaching scientific methods of stopping crime and corruption."

CHAPTER III

COLT CRUSADERS

THE gunman slouching outside the office of the Hazardville *Free Speech* was Tony Cancetti, one of the crowd of toughs who loafed at the Blue Bottle saloon. A heavy, powerful man, there was a glint of dark menace in Cancetti's small eyes.

"Judson Daine don't want any visitors right now," the gunman said. There was a thin edge of danger in his voice.

The windows of the newspaper office were covered by drawn shades. From inside Shane could hear the ugly fleshy sounds of fists striking bone and muscle. All the laziness drained out of Rusty Shane, and his mouth turned flat and hard.

He looked at Sixty Jones, and the cheerful smile on the fat man's face told him Jones was ready. There was a deceptive looseness in the fat man's body. When the time came Sixty Jones could move with surprising speed and suddenness.

Shane pulled his glance to Tony Cancetti. "From what I hear inside, Daine don't want the visitors he's got. I'm goin' in."

Hatred poisoned Tony Cancetti's small eyes. "Boot hill is full of gents like you," he snarled.

Cancetti's stare was on Rusty Shane when he reached for his gun, and that was his mistake. He should have been watching Sixty Jones.

The fat man moved with surprising speed and violence. He slid forward, and the brutal impact of his fist crushed all the air out of Cancetti's lungs. Pain kinked the gunman's thick body forward. It took Sixty Jones two blows to the jaw to drop the man.

"You're losin' your kick," Rusty Shane remarked.

Sixty Jones blew on bruised knuckles. "It's the wages of sin," he sighed.

They opened the door, and went into the newspaper office. What they saw wasn't a pretty thing to see. Two gunmen, Link Travers and Cuff Rawls, had caught the news editor from behind, pinning his arms back so that he was powerless to fight.

It was Gus Wiggin doing the dirty work, his mouth thin and cruel as he slugged the helpless editor.

"This is just a sample, Daine," Wiggin grated. "Make another write-up like you did today about me and my friends, and you'll never live to read it."

Hard knuckles ripped into Judson Daine's mouth. It was brutal the way Wiggin worked, throwing his blows just hard enough to batter and hurt, without bringing unconsciousness. Daine's face was raw with cuts and bruises, lips split and bleeding, dark lumps swelling under his eyes. He had been hurt, and he showed it in his hoarse breathing and twitching muscles. But Gus Wiggin hadn't knocked the derision and hatred out of his stare.

"Damn you, Wiggin—"

A blow smashed into Daine's middle, and the editor's face went white with agony.

Link Travers, a lean, slope-shouldered man with virulence in every line of his narrow face, said harshly, "Let's bend him back, boss—stretch his stomach muscles tight. You'll bust him open when you hit him."

"That would be fun, wouldn't it?" Rusty Shane sneered.

NOT until then did the three gunmen see Shane and Sixty Jones. Their eyes jerked around, and fury darkened their faces. Cuff Rawls sent Judson Daine spinning to the corner of the room in a loose heap.

"It's that damn salesman!"

"I'm goin' to sell you the same medicine you gave Jud Daine," Shane said icily.

Cuff Rawls made a grab for his gun, but he didn't get it. Shane caught the slender killer by the front of the shirt. He jerked him off balance, and sent him stumbling toward the fat man moving in at one side.

"Here's your baby, Sixty!"

Shane didn't wait to see the blow Sixty Jones drove into Cuff Rawls' middle. Shane closed in on big Gus Wiggin, and he had all the fight he could handle in that man.

The man had the strength of a rock crusher. He clubbed out a blow that Shane only partially evaded. It was like an ax chopping into his temple. The room spun, and the floor lurched up and hit Shane.

Half dazed, Shane saw Link Travers facing Sixty Jones, a gun whipping out of leather. He tried to yell, but he couldn't. He didn't need to. Sixty Jones was all rawhide and whalebone beneath his fat, and he knew how to handle himself. He picked up Cuff Rawls bodily, and threw the man at Link Travers. Then Jones closed in on Travers, both fists pumping out from his round shoulders. Travers went down as if he had been kicked by a steer.

Pain from the impact of Gus Wiggin's boot smashing against his ribs drove all the haze out of Rusty Shane's brain. He rolled over, and pushed to his feet, weak and sick inside. He stumbled away from Gus Wiggin's savage rush, trying to pull strength back into his body. It was slow coming.

He saw Wiggin wheel, and start back, both fists slugging. Murder lust was in the man's dark eyes. Shane drove his knuckles into Wiggin's sneering mouth, trying to halt the man's rush, but he didn't have what it took. The redhead tried to dodge away, but he couldn't. A blow slammed into his middle, and another was like a hot iron scraping the shelf of his jaw.

Thunder began crashing inside

Shane's brain. He threw his fists savagely, but he couldn't seem to hurt the man who was driving him back to the wall. Wiggin's slabby muscles seemed to cushion him against all sense of hurt. Each impact of the man's bunched knuckles hammered a new pain into Shane's body. The room was beginning to spin again. He was licked, and he knew it.

Someone crowded between Shane and Wiggin, and the redhead thought it was Sixty Jones. But it wasn't. It was Sheriff Sam Thorne.

"Get back, Wiggin!" the lawman yelled. "Break it up, or I'll throw you both in jail."

"He didn't get half of what he asked for!" Gus Wiggin said bleakly. "Leave us alone, and I'll finish what that redhead started."

NOW that he was free from Wiggin's battering fists, Rusty Shane's senses cleared rapidly. There was a crowd of curious punchers and townsmen outside the door, held back by one of Thorne's deputies. Tony Cancetti was returning to consciousness. As he pushed to his feet in the doorway black hatred knifed his small eyes.

"Stop fiddlin' around your gun, Cancetti, before it gets you in trouble," the sheriff bit out.

Link Travers and Cuff Rawls still showed the effect of Sixty Jones' blows—out cold on the floor. The fat man was slouching near Shane, derisive mirth in his gray eyes.

"You ought to read them books you sell, and learn how to fight," Jones suggested. "It ain't right a fat man should have so many worries. You talk us into trouble, and I have to do the fightin'."

He was trying in his lazy way to salve Shane's temper, to whip up the redhead's humor, but he failed.

There was no mirth in Rusty Shane, and he was all the more dangerous because of the change. He had been whipped in a fight, and he didn't like that. He didn't like the warm taste of blood in his mouth, or Gus Wiggin's hating sneer.

"Take it easy, Rusty," Sixty Jones muttered. "Let's get out of here before we end up in jail. It ain't our fuss."

"We're staying!" Shane said grimly.

Judson Daine was still sitting where he had slumped in the corner of the room. There was a long furrow across the sole of his outthrust boot, where something had cut into the leather. The editor's face was raw-bruised and bloody, but there was still a strange, stubborn glint in his eyes. Something almost sardonic. He pushed weakly to his feet, a tall, loose-coupled man with a sharp, bony jaw. A worm of blood crawled from the corner of his split lips.

"I won't be worth much for a few days," he said to Shane. "I could sure use some help if you're stayin' in town."

Sheriff Thorne broke in bluntly. "Don't waste time askin' this redhead for help, Daine. He's leavin' town."

Temper got into Rusty Shane's stare. "You figure you can make me, sheriff?" he shot back.

There was a stubborn, reckless streak in him that wouldn't quit once it got started. Murder had brought him into Hazardville, and murder would keep him in town. He knew now who had murdered the rancher that morning in the badlands, but he had no proof that would hold in court. He had to get that proof. He had to answer the suspicion haunting him that there was more to the county's troubles than was on the surface—cunning and treachery, one man's greed for power.

"Stay around here, Shane, and I'll nail your hide to the wall," Thorne rasped. "This is none of your affair."

"When I see two men holdin' Daine so that Gus Wiggin can hand out a beating, I make it my affair."

Sixty Jones groaned, "For gosh sakes, Rusty—"

Wrath darkened the sheriff's square

face, and his voice came bleak and harsh.

"Daine asked for what he got. He had no right to pile into Wiggin without proof. He was just tryin' to stir up trouble, and he did—for himself. He's goin' to jail, and that ends the job he offered you."

CHAPTER IV

Double-Crossing Coyotes

JUDSON DAINE made no complaint when he was thrown into jail. Instead he seemed to find an odd pleasure in it. But the job Rusty Shane had been offered didn't end with the editor's being locked up.

"You started out to clean up the county with your newspaper, and I'll finish the job," Shane promised.

Tension gripped Hazardville's dusty streets. Until sundown, Shane prowled the town, talking with anyone who would answer his questions. When he returned to the newspaper office, he found Sixty Jones glumly waiting for him.

"The only reason I hang around you," the fat man said broodingly, "is that you make the ordinary troubles of life seem monotonous. But this time you're stirrin' a ruckus out of nothin'."

There was a bleak glint in Rusty Shane's dark eyes, his mouth thin and hard. "I never had more to start a war with," he said coldly. "For one thing, I just found out it was Martin Rand's lawyer who had Jud Daine thrown into jail."

Sixty Jones grunted acidly. "What of it? It was for the town's good. Rand runs a store, and he don't want his customers killed off just because Daine was loose with words."

There was no mirth in Shane's short laugh. "All Rand was thinkin' about was his own hide," he grated. "If the gang in Wiggin's saloon were cleaned out because of Daine's newspaper, Martin Rand would be hurt too. Daine was right about Wiggin's crowd being crooks, *and Rand is workin' with that gang!*"

Interest brightened the fat man's weary eyes. "I got a hunch you're diggin' my grave, but I like it. Go on."

There was a cold and inexorable edge in Rusty Shane's voice as he talked.

"Rand has a good thing here, and he knows it. Gus Wiggin's gang rustles cattle from the county ranchers, and they have to go to Rand's store for credit. The ranchers go deeper in debt all the time, because the rustlers keep them too broke to pay Rand back. Rand plans to foreclose, and take over every ranch that owes him. He's already got every cowman in the county on his heels. Rand only charges ten percent interest a month on his loans. He's generous with his poison, like a sidewinder!"

"Ten percent a month!" Sixty Jones cursed with sudden heat. "That ain't legal! It's arson, or somethin'."

"Usury is the word," Shane said flatly, "and it ain't legal."

Jones eyed the redhead narrowly. "Who told you all that about Rand and Wiggin?" he cracked out.

"Every cowman I talked to told me about Rand's rate of interest on his loans. I figured the tie-up between Rand and Wiggin for myself."

"Your little brain has figured up a lot of trouble for me since I started ridin' with you," the fat man growled. "Mebbe you're right at that this time. The ranchers wouldn't squawk to the law because Rand was their only hope of feedin' their families. Anyhow Rand probably has his books doctored so the law couldn't get him. What are you goin' to use for proof?"

RUSTY SHANE'S glance shifted through the shadows gathering in the deeper end of the room. Over there were the type cases and the hand-powered printing press, a workbench that held an imposing stone, the forms and composing sticks.

"I was just over at the jail and had a talk with Jud Daine," he said softly.

"He gave me an idea how a newspaper works. You think we could put together a new front page tonight?"

Sixty Jones snorted. "Sure, like we could fill up Grand Canyon with a shovel!" he jeered. "I nosed around this place while you were gone. There's a blue million letters and things in them type cases, and they all have to be put together backwards or upside down, or something. It'd take us a month to make a new first page."

"How about a couple headlines?"

The fat man frowned. "I reckon we could do that," he growled. "What's the idea?"

Shane told him, and an unholy mirth glinted in Sixty Jones' eyes.

"You'll be printing enough libel to get us hung," the fat man said. "And if it starts the war you expect, we'll be wrapped up in the middle of it. You think of the nicest ways to get me killed."

It was close to midnight when they finished work. They had two newspapers to show for their effort, both bannered with bold black letters proclaiming *Special Edition*. The headlines they had printed would have soured the soul of a skilled printer, poorly spaced and unbalanced, but they brought grim satisfaction to Rusty Shane.

The headlines of one paper read:

GUS WIGGIN ADMITS GUILT!

Claims Martin Rand hired him to rustle cattle from ranchers. Sam Walling murdered during raid!

The second newspaper bore different headlines, reading:

MARTIN RAND DEMANDS CLEAN-UP!

Says Gus Wiggin and other Blue Bottle Saloon characters should be prosecuted as killers and cattle thieves! Claims to have sufficient proof for conviction.

Sixty Jones grunted sourly. "They'll know it's a trick when they read the columns under them scareheads."

Rusty Shane picked up a rag, and smudged ink on the columns beneath the headlines, obliterating the letters.

"Seein' as how we're new in the publishing business, I reckon they won't blame us for gettin' their papers smeared up," he drawled.

His eyes were stony as he looked at the fat man. "I'll drop off the paper with the Wiggin headlines where Martin Rand will see it," he said grimly. "I'll leave the Rand headlines at Wiggin's place. When Rand and Wiggin see these papers, they'll think they were double-crossed. You bring the sheriff, and I'll meet you here."

"What if Thorne won't come?"

"You got a gun," Shane said. "Bring him."

SHERIFF SAM THORNE came, but it took the threat of Sixty Jones' gun to bring him. He was in a savage humor.

"You'll both land in jail for this," he cursed.

"Not as long as I'm holdin' this gun," Sixty Jones said calmly. "Keep quiet, Thorne."

Rusty Shane led off down the street. He halted in the black slot between the feed store and saddle shop, where he could watch both the Blue Bottle Saloon and the front of Martin Rand's store. They could do nothing now but wait.

The night was black, and darkness softened the raw bones of the town's buildings. Light were dropping out here and there along the street. A puncher, half drunk, weaved down the plank walk to the hotel, humming an off-key tune under his breath. Somewhere a dog yapped at a shadow, and went silent. A horse wickered in the livery corral across town.

"Shane, what in blazes is this?" the sheriff growled.

The redhead murmured tensely, "Wait!"

The lights dropped out of the windows of Martin Rand's general store, but there was a half-visible activity in the darkness of the place. A man

drifted out of the door, followed by another. They halted behind posts that braced the board awning, staring toward the saloon across the street.

Another man shadowed to a position behind a rain barrel at the near corner of the building. The tiny orange-red glow of a cigarette brightened and dulled against the darkness, marking the position of a fourth man in the doorway.

A man's low, virulent voice floated from the front of the store to where Shane waited.

"Don't rush things. Wait till you're sure."

Rusty Shane whispered to the sheriff, "Recognize that voice?"

Thorne nodded. "Martin Rand's." His voice was thin, puzzled, truculent.

The redhead asked another question. "Is anyone watchin' the jail?"

"Not since you pulled me away, and I was due to leave anyhow," he growled. Growing tension sharpened his low voice. "Shane, what is this?"

"Nothin' much," Shane drawled. "Rand and Wiggin were workin' together to take over this county, that's all."

The sheriff smothered an oath. "You're loco!"

"I didn't have proof, so Sixty and me printed a couple newspapers with different headlines. Now both Rand and Wiggin think they were double-crossed. If you wait another minute I got a hunch—"

Men began filing out of the Blue Bottle—Cuff Rawls, Link Travers, Tony Cancetti, Gus Wiggin, all killers by every sign of the profession. They fanned apart, back-lighted by the lamp glow in the windows behind them.

One of them whispered nervously, a hoarse sound that reached Shane's ears. "I don't like this, boss."

"Shut up, Link!"

They began moving toward the general store, wary and alert, dangerous. Their guns were up, but they weren't the first to fire, and that was proof enough of Martin Rand's guilt.

Out of the darkness broke Rand's harsh yell. "Get those double-crossers!"

A shotgun roared at the front of the store, and the noise was echoed by the blare of other guns along the line. Plainly visible on the moonlighted street, Cuff Rawls' slender frame seemed lifted bodily into the air by the blast of buckshot that hit him. He stumbled back against Link Travers, but Travers was already hit and dead on his feet. Both men went down together.

IT WAS different with Gus Wiggin and Tony Cancetti. They had escaped that first blast of murder lead. They were killers to the core, and they didn't try to break for cover. Their guns roared into life, and they began dodging toward the store, deadly and inexorable.

A man by the awning post screamed and went down. Another staggered into the open, clutching his chest and coughing. His legs caved under him, and he fell against the hitchrack, jackknifing over the rail. He stopped moving.

Sheriff Thorne cursed in Rusty Shane's ear. "I've got to stop that."

He lurched out on the plank walk, but Shane grabbed his arm, tried to jerk him back. "They're crooks, Thorne. Let them kill each other off."

"I got my job to do!" the lawman flared. He jerked free of Shane's grip, yelled piercingly, "Throw down them guns, all of you! This is Thorne talkin'!"

The sheriff's shout brought swift silence to the guns of the outlaws. Then both Rand and Wiggin forgot their hatred for each other to face a common enemy. A weapon smashed, shattering the brief fall of silence. Shane felt more than heard the slug that whipped past his face.

He drifted to one side, his gun swinging up. He began closing in on

the store, flanked by Sixty Jones and the sheriff. There was nothing that moment but the roar of Colts and the clashing of harsh echoes.

Someone went down heavily in the store doorway, and Shane knew that would be Martin Rand. The gunman behind the rain barrel was silent, and Shane knew he was firing only by the kick of recoil against his bent elbow. Tony Cancetti started running down the street, and was tripped up by his own dying strength.

Sixty Jones yelled, "Wiggin ain't down. Where's Gus Wiggin?"

A vague movement in the thick darkness under the store awning marked the saloon owner's attempt to escape. Rusty Shane sheered off in that direction, blocking the outlaw's flight and pinning him against the wall of the building.

Shane shouted, "Don't try anything, Wiggin!"

He sensed more than saw the outlaw's violent movement. He veered to one side, and felt Wiggin's slug jerk at a loose fold in his shirt. Shane threw his bullet a foot inside the fire of Wiggin's muzzle flame, and saw the killer's vague shape sag loosely to the ground.

The fight was over then. Alarmed yells were rising through the town, and men were running down the street. Voices shouted against voices. Through that confusion came Sheriff Thorne's piercing yell.

"Stay back! It's all over—stay back!"

The silence that fell didn't last long. Somewhere down the street sounded the full, solid boom of an explosion, a blast that seemed to shake every building in town. A woman in some distant house screamed, thin and sharp.

A man on the street cursed thickly, "That came from the bank! Someone blowed the bank safe!"

It was a strange time for Rusty Shane to smile, but there was no mirth in the hard twist of his mouth.

CHAPTER V

HANGNOOSE LEGACY

SOMEONE brought a lantern, and the yellow flow of light fell on the wreckage inside the bank. Acrid fumes still floated in the air, and the doors of the safe sagged on explosion-twisted hinges. Smoke blackened the walls.

"Close to twenty thousand dollars was kept in that safe," Thorne said bitterly. "Whoever pulled this job sure worked fast."

A man cursed savagely. "He can't be far off. We'll fan out and comb the county for him."

"You'd never catch him that way."

Every eye in the room jerked to Rusty Shane. The redhead went on coolly, "If you gents would spend more time with books an' less with bullets you'd know what to do now. As it says in the *Library of Knowledge* books I sell, 'A bird in the hand gathers no moss'!"

The killer who had murdered Sam Walling in the badlands, and the man who had robbed the town's bank were the same—Shane knew that now with bleak certainty. He was lazily sure of himself as he faced the townsmen, but beneath his indolence was the hard and flinty edge of a manhunter.

"You mean 'A rolling stone—'" a man corrected jeeringly.

"I know that one too," Shane drawled. "People who live in glass houses are better than two in the bush." He moved his glance to Sheriff Thorne. "There's somethin' you don't know yet, Thorne. A bunch of Sam Walling's cattle were run off yesterday mornin'. Sixty and me met Walling on the rustlers' trail, in the badlands. Just after we met him, he was murdered by a drygulcher who got away."

The sheriff cursed harshly. "Why didn't you—"

"I had my reason for not telling you before now," Shane broke in grimly. "Tonight I used the news of Walling's murder to help force Gus Wiggin and

Martin Rand into showing their hands. But the murderer wasn't with Wiggin or Rand. He was playing a lone hand, and he's the gent who pulled this bank robbery. We'll go after him now if you want, Thorne."

The sheriff nodded bleakly. "I'll stop off at the jail for some shells first."

Rusty Shane smiled thinly. "In my *Library of Knowledge*, it says the closest distance between a sheriff and a murderer is a straight line. I want you to count your steps, Thorne, just to prove that."

FOLLOWED by the lawman, Shane led out the open rear door of the bank. He turned into the narrow alley that paralleled the town's main street, and then angled through the darkness alongside the jail. He halted inside the jail office. Lighted by the ceiling lamp Shane could see Judson Daine in the barred cell, seated on the bunk.

"No hurry about getting those gun loads, sheriff," the redhead said. The mirth was out of him now, and his eyes were cold and hard. He drawled, "I reckon a man as important in town as a newspaper editor might be able to steal an impression of your cell key and have a duplicate made. Am I right, Thorne?"

The sheriff nodded. "That wouldn't be hard, but—" His eyes narrowed. "What are you driving at?"

"Jud Daine," Shane said. "There's your bank-robbin' murderer," he added, and he pointed to the newspaper editor.

The silence that clamped down in the jail office was harsh with the threat of impending violence. Surprise froze the sheriff. Someone sucked in a low, ragged breath, and locked it in tense lungs. Judson Daine came up off the bunk fast, his craggy face first white, then dark with anger.

"Shane, you're crazy!" he rasped.

Sixty Jones raised a puzzled growl to the redhead. "He couldn't be! He's locked in his cell!"

"That's the alibi he counted on," Shane said softly. "But like the sheriff said, it would be easy enough for him to steal an impression of the cell key and have a duplicate made. That's what he did. He slipped out of jail, blew the bank safe, then came back here while we were fighting Wiggin and Rand on the street. That's why he stirred up trouble with Wiggin with his newspaper—to get himself an alibi by being thrown in jail, and to make a good chance for him to rob the bank."

Hatred swelled a vein into a dark track across the newspaper editor's forehead. "What kind of a frame are you trying to put on me?" he broke out harshly.

"It's no frame," Shane's voice was softly mocking. "It's a hangnoose, killer. The slug I threw at you after you murdered Sam Walling cut a groove in the sole of your boot, Daine. You made tracks that put me on your trail when I first saw you in your office. You killed Walling because he knew some dirty work you pulled in Texas, but I didn't have proof that would stand in court. So I had to let you play your hand out. I gave you enough rope, and it'll hang you!"

Behind the cell door, Jud Daine was tense and poised, hand belt high and close to his open shirt.

SHERIFF SAM THORNE said narrowly, "I still ain't heard any proof, Shane. You haven't convinced me yet by a long ways."

Shane asked, "You counted your steps here. How far is it to the bank?"

One hundred and sixty feet. But I don't see—"

"Habit is a hard thing to break," Shane drawled coldly. "I counted on Daine bein' the type of man who wouldn't go outside unless he had his coat on. Besides that, a coat would hide his white shirt in the darkness."

He crossed to the editor's coat hanging from a wall peg. He glanced coldly at Daine.

"Remember when I called on you

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here yesterday afternoon? I asked for a match, and reached into your coat to get it. Only I didn't want a match. I just wanted a chance to slit a hole in your coat pocket, and drop something inside."

Shane reached into the pocket, into the lining, pulled out something that looked like a watch. But it wasn't a watch.

"It's a pedometer," the redhead said icily. "It's a new dingus that was invented to measure how far a man walks. This was on zero when I slipped it into your pocket, and now it reads three hundred and twenty feet—the distance you walked from here to the bank, and back!"

The killer made his move then. It was a swift and violent move, with no expression on his face to betray his intent. His hand slashed under his shirt, whipped out gripping a derringer.

Sixty Jones yelled, and Shane threw himself to one side of the slug that roared at him. The redhead's gun swept out of leather, crashed even as the killer made his second murderous try. Lead scraped a long furrow out of the wall at Shane's side, and he heard his own slug clang against a cell bar. The bullet shunted off the bar, and blood appeared on the front of the killer's shirt. Daine spun slowly, and went down.

Sheriff Thorne leaped forward, then after a moment came out of the cell, his jaw stone hard.

"He'll live to hang," he said.

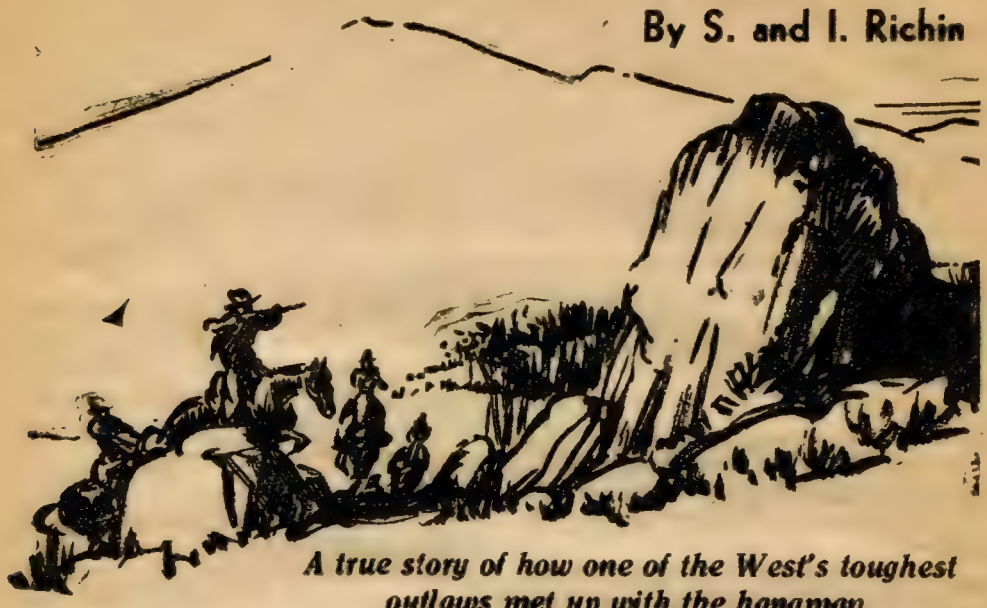
After the crowd was gone, Thorne came back to Rusty Shane. He was frowning slightly, and he was slow to speak.

Finally he said, "If it wasn't for you, this county would never have been cleaned up. Maybe I'm just dull between the ears. You say this *Library of Knowledge* you sell will sharpen up a man's thinkin'?"

"Like the keen blade of wisdom," the redhead said. "There are twelve books in the set, and the standard price is a dollar a book. But because you're a friend, I'll make you a bargain," Shane added, and he knew he had a sale. "You can have the full set of books for only twelve dollars, cash."

Vigilante Vengeance

By S. and I. Richin



A true story of how one of the West's toughest outlaws met up with the hangman.

LYNCH-LAW fever ran riot in the blood of the placer-miner vigilantes in the Montana gold country district of Bannack and Virginia City, during the early 1860's.

Men had disappeared on the tortuous mountain trails, weighted down with the gold yield of their diligent efforts. Fortunes of gold dust vanished with them, like gunsmoke caught in a prairie wind. Others had been discovered bushwhacked out among the alders, robbed and stripped of weapons.

With phenomenal regularity and precision every stagecoach bearing transferred gold or wealthy passengers had been waylaid by road agents. The occupants were often murdered, and valuables running into countless thousands of dollars hauled away with only the silent, stolid hillsides to bear witness to outlaw ruthlessness.

The boom town territory was gripped in panic. Placer miners, wandering among the mountain trails and gulches probed the earth, never certain the impassive hillsides did not conceal a leveled, bushwhacking Winchester.

The outlaws struck and struck again along the trails, killing and plundering. Vigilante groups sprung up in the shape of outraged miner citizens. Still the outlaws struck, leaving a trail of bullet-riddled corpses in the wake of their six-gun savagery. Struck and vanished.

The death count had tolled off to over a hundred citizens, including numerous vigilantes. Finally sweat-and-strain investigation exposed Henry Plummer, cultured New Englander who had come to the West, as the chief and brains of the gang.

Stunned, the vigilantes exchanged incredulous stares that night when they confronted the incredible meaning of their damning end-of-the-trail conclusion. The murdering chief was their sheriff and an honored member

of their own vigilante group! The confessions of captured gunmen, extracted in the shadow of gallows justice, established that certainty.

"Damned coyote," one thickset vigilante gritted. "No wonder them outlaws never missed a stage loaded with gold. As sheriff, Plummer laid out the trail she'd follow. He must have planted his road agents in the passes and tipped them off to the cargo. George Ives, Red Yager, Buck Stinson, Ned Gay—"

Bitterness pulled his lips back in a thin, bloodless line as he intoned the now known identity of Plummer's road agents. "Killed the vigilantes we lost, too. He joined up to spy on our plans. Probably had us all marked for murder."

A LEAN-FACED miner with flinty eyes shoved back a battered felt hat, pawed his sweating forehead. He said with deadly grim humor, "This time Plummer's slow on the draw. We've got him marked for swinging first. Let's bust in on him in Bannack and git a rope round his murderin' neck afore he gets wind we got him dead to rights."

"Havin' him dead to rights and havin' him dead in a noose is two different things, partner," another spoke up sharply. "One's talkin'—the other's doin'. Fust off, Plummer'll never be taken alive with a gun on his hip. He's got ears in every wall in this territory. Mebbe he knows we're here now. If we don't round him up alone tonight he'll rally his gang by tomorrow night and do battle. Facts are facts—and facts take facin'. We may even be outnumbered tonight."

A muttering of low-toned assent rose up from the twenty-five vigilantes grouped tensely there in Virginia City. Facts were facts. And these facts were dangerous. Investigation had revealed that the Plummer gang extended into and out of every town position from lowly clerk to high justice offices. The number of men involved comprised a large proportion of the district population! That spoke for daring organization powers. Henry Plummer would be hard to lynch.

Grim-faced, the men got set for trouble. Peacemakers and Winchesters were scrutinized painstakingly with zealous, last minute care. Not a man was unaware of Plummer's reputation for a matchless six-gun draw. He could sling lead with the best the wild region offered, a skill that had principally qualified him for the position of sheriff.

They mounted their horses grimly, making a dark, vengeful shadow against the moon-streaked night as they rode along the trail to Bannack.

Many thoughts raced through their minds as they rode. Some wondered, with natural curiosity, how the arch desperado would face death after feeding its maw for years with the lives of countless men.

Would he die with his boots on? Many outlaws facing the noose had requested their boots be removed in defiance of the traditional badman finish. Would Plummer kick out equally contemptuous? Or would he die cursing his captors? Begging for mercy? Sullen? Penitent? Brave, with the hard impassive front of the toughened outlaw?

Plummer was different from most Westerners. He had the characteristics of the gunman but none of the breeding. Raised under the graceful influences of New England, he introduced a rare touch of culture to the raw frontier territory. But his adjustment to the new environment had been as swift as it had been ruthless. Dealing in murder he hired only proved, tested murderers for accomplices. At twenty-seven he'd already grown immensely rich, cutting a bloody notch in outlawry.

Tall, soft-spoken, commanding, he took a devoted wife and wrapped himself in a clever disguise of worthwhile citizenship.

THE black, thundering shadow of the vigilantes roared into the sleeping town of Bannack. Fast-riding men flung a tight loop of flesh and poised shooting steel around Plummer's house. No illumination showed in the windows.

Quiet wrapped around the paunchy, wood frame house. Picked men advanced cautiously, unperceived, up the front steps. Inside, dark silence rose up around them in the gloom. The only break in the curtain of dark showed in the gleam from readied vigilante six-guns.

The men tensed as they approached Plummer's bedroom. Was he awake inside, waiting in armed readiness? They pressed open the door. No outlaw gun-thunder shattered the silence with the expected desperate challenge. A new square of dark silence loomed up at them. Breathing hard, the vigilantes pushed through it.

They stormed the bed. Dazed and wild-eyed, Henry Plummer was caught unarmed, routed out of deep slumber.

Little bristling pin points of fury glittered in his cold-eyed glance as he surveyed his captors. Every muscle in his whippy, slim height went rigid in desperation. There was bitter hate in the twisted, bloodless streak of his mouth. He glared at the ring of covering weapons.

Explanations were unnecessary. He knew the men and their purpose. For the first time in his lawless life, Henry Plummer faced the baleful eyes of vigilante guns. He made no attempt to bolt. The guns pinioned him into subjection.

Moving fast, the vigilantes pulled him to the scaffold where, as sheriff, he had directed badman hangings. The men surged about him, prepared the noose. Moonlight dropped a weird illumination on the scene. The grim, sweating faces of the vigilantes shone spottily in the nocturnal glow.

Plummer stared from their frozen expressions to the rigid scaffold wood and back again. Each seemed equally impassive to his fate.

Every vigilante eye clung to Plummer's aristocratic features as a box was placed under the prepared noose.

"No!" Plummer shouted as they prodded him to the box. Terror loosened his strained features into a rubbery mass of quaking flesh. "Don't hang me!" he pleaded with the men. "I'll give you anything you want! All the money you ask! Only don't hang me!"

The sweating miners, their grim purpose uninfluenced by his pleading, remembered the murdered men in the trails. They formed a small ring around him, pushed him toward the box.

Plummer continued begging for his life. "Cut out my tongue if you want revenge! Do anything you want to do with me! Only let me live. I'm too bad to die!"

"You're too bad to live," several vigilantes said. "Git on that box." They moved at him when he hesitated.

Plummer mounted the box, resigned to the uselessness of pleading. Moonlight threw pale streaks upon his black hair as the vigilante vengeance clamped about his neck. As he jumped, kicking, a long sigh of relaxed tenseness rose from the men.

"There goes Henry Plummer," one said. "Good riddance."

Shortly after another corrected him, "There went Henry Plummer," the vigilante said. "Plumb to hell!"

Powdersmoke in Panamint

By Felix Flammonde

Colton Banning, editor of the Panamint Press, didn't believe that the fastest draw should be the law; nor that powdersmoke should be more powerful than print. But when a ruthless owl-hooter put a pistol in Banning's ribs, the printer wished for some hot lead bullets instead of cold lead type!

COLTON BANNING leaned on the sloping top of his type case and fixed Coggs with a stern gray eye. "Well, I hate to lose a client," the young publisher of the *Panamint Press* said, "but fellows like you are a drawback to the community. The sooner your neck gets stretched, Tim, the better we'll all like it."

"Except me," answered Coggs, a big bushy-whiskered ex-bullwhacker who stood seven feet in his socks and was built like the oxen he used to goad over the freight trails of Death Valley. "I ain't got no neck to speak of, but I aim to keep it like it is."

He looked at Banning with a crafty light in his large pale eyes, then scored a direct hit on a brass cuspidor near the hand press on the other side of the small shop. He wiped his bearded mouth with the back of a freckled hand and complained, "Consarn it, Banning, stage robbin' and road agentin' was a legitimate business till you come to Panamint a few months back."

Coggs shook a dirty finger the size of a banana in Banning's square-jawed face. "An' now," he accused, "you're fixin' to make the town so dang pure nobody'd live in it if you paid 'em!"

Banning went on picking type from the case and setting it in the stick held in his left hand. He worked fast, fingers flying with the skill of long practice, composing as he went. He was preparing an editorial, scorching enough, he hoped, to get some action from the sheriff's office down at Independence, the county seat. Without looking up from the type case before him, he said:

"Robbery and disturbing the peace are bad enough, Coggs. But murder, that's different! You've overplayed your hand this time, killing Jim Holly. Holly was a good stage driver, a good citizen, and a good friend of mine. Hanging you a hundred times wouldn't pay for him, but I'll be satisfied to see you hang just once."

Coggs said defensively, "Jim Holly committed suicide, I tell you! I says to him, 'Jim, stop them horses an' don't do nothin' foolish.' But Jim, he dived into the boot for his shotgun, so I had to down him in self-defense." He grinned at Banning and smirked virtuously. "You think the justice would of turned me loose if he thought it was any different?"

Banning straightened up, wiped his ink-stained fingers on the blue front of his worn denim apron and glowered at Coggs's evil face.

Coggs walked to the door and then suddenly swung back, pulled the .45 from the black leather belt at his bulging middle, and fired almost before the muzzle cleared the holster.

Banning's left hand went numb from fingers to forearm. The stick spun in the air, type raining on the floor like hail. For a moment he thought the bullet had taken his hand, too, but it had only smashed his stick.

Coggs shoved his pistol back into the leather and swaggered out with his spurs rattling and his boot heels clacking on the plank floor. At the door he paused and looked back.

"If you want to stay in business, Banning," he suggested, "you better not print nothin' more about me from now on. I might have to down you in self-defense, savvy?"

THINGS in Panamint were not going quite as Colton Banning had expected they would when he first arrived in the town. A few months back, he had quit his job on the *Frisco Clarion* and hit out for the silver mines. He took his small hand press, a couple cases of type, and a hundred pounds of paper with him.

In Panamint he'd found the silver stampede in full swing. The tent town had sprung up like mushrooms after a rain, and tough citizens from every part of California and Nevada were pouring in like ants at a picnic.

Dust choked the single street that led to the road through Surprise Canyon and the flaming Death Valley floor. Soft-handed gamblers and painted-faced girls from Frisco's Barbary Coast rubbed shoulders with gray-shirted miners, teamsters, and bullwhackers.

But there was no law in Panamint, or anywhere else for a good many miles. Colton Banning saw immediately that this condition had to be remedied before the town would ever develop. He elected himself to do the remedying.

The mountains around Panamint were practically solid silver, which meant that soon, with law and order and organization, the town would take its rightful place in the front

rank of the region's important mining communities.

But law and order come only when the majority of the people want it. And most of the Panamint people, Banning soon found, did not want it. Most especially, Tim Coggs and his gang didn't want it. Panamint's future lay in silver, Banning saw, while Tim Coggs's future seemed to be in lead—hot lead.

So Banning, in the first edition of the *Panamint Press*, started his crusade against hot lead and for silver. He had little success the first few months, for Coggs and his ilk had been careful to rob only, but not to murder. But now, with Jim Holly dead and Coggs admitting the killing, Banning was determined to make his dream of law for Panamint come true.

The big bullwhacker's parting threat had hardly died upon the air before Banning picked up his broom and began sweeping the type into a pile. When it was distributed back into the cases again, he took his stick and recomposed his editorial. Anger burned in his gray eyes as he worked, and there was a little knot of tight muscle on his clamped-shut jaw.

"All right, Coggs," Banning muttered to himself. "You asked for it. And, by heaven, I'm going to give it to you!"

It was long past dinner time, but Banning was too angry and too busy to eat. He was still working when a figure passing the open door caught his eye. Banning called:

"Hey, Willie! Come in out of the sun. Want to see you!"

WILLIE JONES halted and peered into Banning's shop like a man poking his head into a bear's den. Willie was small and leathery, and until a few months past had spent most of his life following a burro through the desert. But Panamint had elevated him to a loftier and more noble calling, for Willie could read and write and carried a dog-eared Bible where most men carried a flask.

He edged into the print shop and fixed his bright little eyes warily upon Banning.

"What you want with me, you young hellion? Fixing to start a ruckus, hey? Well, don't you do it, see? The Lord—"

Banning set down his stick. "Willie, you turned that skulking killer, Tim Coggs, loose. Why?"

Willie bristled and glared at Banning. A two-day growth of gray stubble covered his monkeylike face, and his flannel shirt and faded jeans looked as if he'd slept in them—which he had, often enough.

"As duly elected recorder of deeds and justice of the peace for the City of Panamint," he began pompously, "I don't reckon I have to account for my actions to nobody. But seeing as how you supported my campaign in your noisepaper—ha, ha, pretty good, hey?—I guess I can afford to answer your question."

"That's fine," Banning said sarcastically. "And now, if you're through making speeches, I'd like to know why you let Coggs go after killing Jim Holly."

"Well," Willie said, trying to sound properly judicial, "we haven't got a jail. We haven't got a peace officer—excepting me—and I don't pack a gun. And without a jail, you can't hold nobody prisoner. So all I could do was take Coggs's word that he downed Holly in self-defense."

Willie looked at Banning, then ended smugly, "But don't you go thinking Coggs got off scot-free. No, sirree! I fined him three dollars for discharging firearms inside the city limits."

Banning shook his head and inquired caustically, "I suppose the fine went into the treasury, of course?"

"Not exactly," Willie confessed. "I don't get paid any salary, you know."

Banning turned back to his work. "You're as bad as all the rest," he told Willie disgustedly. "There isn't another soul in Panamint, besides my-

self, who cares whether there's law in the town or not."

"It don't do any good to care," Willie argued. "We got to get the sheriff of the county to recognize us. We haven't had no luck in that direction, so far. Independence is too far away, and the sheriff don't go looking for folks he hasn't lost. Heard him say so, many's the time." Willie turned to the door. "Well, got to be going."

"So long," Banning said, nodding absently as Willie left. Everything the little recorder had said was true, too true. Banning was too fair a man to blame another for not being able to cope with a hopeless situation. The thing to do when things were going wrong, Banning thought, was to step in and take a hand yourself. But in this particular instance, what could he do?

The obvious thing, of course, was to catch Tim Coggs in some lawless act and capture him red-handed. But how? More important still, how to force Coggs into confessing that Jim Holly had been the victim of the big bullwhacker's cold-blooded lust for killing?

THE next edition of the *Panamint Press* carried Banning's scathing editorial on its front page. Banning addressed a copy to the sheriff at the county seat, and personally handed it to the stage driver for delivery. Then he trudged back to his office, hoping for results that he feared would not materialize.

In front of the Skeleton Saloon he ran into Tim Coggs. The owlhooter was unsteady from an overload of red-eye, and his heavy face twisted into a snarl of hatred as he saw the newspaper owner.

"Hey, you!" Coggs reached out a hairy hand and clamped his claws on Banning's shoulder as the younger man tried to ignore him. "I just seen your mangy paper, you little pup!"

Banning twisted out of Coggs's clutch and faced him squarely. "I hope you liked it," he said. "Of course, I didn't say everything I feel about you, because the *Press* doesn't print that kind of language. But you get the idea." Coggs reached for him again, but Banning stepped easily back. "And that's only the first, Coggs. The paper is going to crusade every week from now on, till I get some action out of the authorities. If you're wise, you'll take that as a hint."

He turned to go, but the drunken Coggs reached for him again, and this time Banning was unable to elude the bully's grasp. He felt the bullwhacker's big paw twist itself into the collar of his shirt, while the other hamlike hand got a fistful of the slack of his pants. Coggs swung the smaller man clear of the ground and held him helpless while Banning kicked and fought to free himself.

Then the printer went sailing through the air to land in the dusty street in front of the saloon. Coggs shot three bullets into his hat, and it flew off and went rolling away.

Banning got up, clawing dust from his eyes and mouth and raging inwardly. If he had a gun, and knew how to use it, he'd—But he was a journalist, not a gunman, and what chance had printer's ink against pistol balls?

He retrieved his hat and walked stiffly down the street to his office, without a glance at the crowd gathered in front of the saloon, or without ears for the taunt the bullwhacker bellowed after him.

"That'll learn you, you piddlin' little pup!" The owlhooter thumbed another shot that puffed dust at Banning's retreating heels. "An' you can tell the sheriff he'll git a dose of the same if he shows up here fixin' to mess with Tim Coggs! Haw! Haw! Haw!" Coggs's guffaw sounded like a burro braying in a tin barn.

Back in his office, Banning slumped at his desk in the afternoon heat. He was still burning with anger, but now his fury was tinged with disgust and despair. That crowd back at the saloon, laughing like a pack of hyenas

at his treatment by Coggs—a bunch like that didn't deserve the help he was trying to give the town.

If they didn't care whether Panamint ever amounted to anything or not, why should he? If they were content to take out just enough silver to get drunk on and to buy ammunition to shoot each other up with, why should he worry?

BANNING straightened his shoulders and glanced around his dinky shop. In this one room, scarcely large enough to swing a cat, was everything he owned in the world.

Over there, back of the small hand press and behind a partition made of gunny sacks, was his living quarters; just a wooden cot and a blanket, a pitcher and bowl on a soap box under a cracked mirror pegged to the wall, and a rusty little two-lid cookstove he'd bought for three dollars.

"A lot I've got to fight for!" Banning muttered bitterly, his usually friendly mouth lifting in a lopsided sneer at himself. "For two cents I'd throw up the whole business, head back to Market Street, and let Panamint go to hell in its own way! I'm a fool to—"

A shadow fell across his desk, and he looked up to see Willie Jones entering the door of the shop.

"Tsk, tsk," Willie reproved, shaking his head. "Heat getting you, young feller, talking to yourself like that? Now, the Lord—"

"Willie," Banning said, "I'm at the point of quitting. If Panamint wants fellows like Tim Coggs instead of prosperity, that's all right with me. I don't see why I should—"

The justice of the peace perched on Banning's desk and regarded the discouraged younger man owlishly.

"That don't sound like a crusading editor to me," he remarked. "That little ruckus down the street just now hasn't cooled you off, has it? The Lord says—"

Banning pounded the desk with his fist. "Why shouldn't I cool off? When Coggs jumped me, did anybody offer to help? Does anybody in this whole blasted town care about anything but fighting and drinking? Does anybody want to see Panamint grow up to be the mining center it should be? No!"

"I do," Willie Jones said solemnly. "And there's others like me. But we can't do anything unless we get the law behind us. We've been counting on you and your paper for that. You aren't going to let us down now, are you?"

Banning relaxed and leaned back in his chair. He was beginning to think rationally again, and Willie Jones's earnestness touched him.

Maybe if he did stay and continue the fight, something good would come of it. After all, he wasn't a quitter at heart. Besides, now that he had established his business and made a start, he'd never be able to hold his head up again if he let a big windbag like Coggs run him out of town.

"Well," he reconsidered, "if you've got any ideas that'll help, I want to hear them. You mentioned knowing the sheriff down at Independence. What kind of man is he?"

Willie crossed his skinny knees and looked thoughtful.

"Well, now, his name's Windy Dolan, as you know. Comes by his monicker natural, 'cause he's a great talker. Talked himself into getting elected sheriff, and has held onto the job ever since just by talking some more."

Banning interrupted, "Is he tough? A killer?"

"No, not by a long shot. Only shooting he's good at is shooting off his mouth."

"Seems to me," Banning nodded, "that if he was a doer instead of a talker, he'd have been up here after Coggs and a few others a long time ago. I wonder—"

"Like most blow-hards," Willie offered, "Windy Dolan is touchy and full of vanity. Now, the Lord—"

Banning slapped the desk with his palm. "That's it! I'm beginning to see

how we can get the sheriff up here!" He jumped up, put on his denim apron, and reached for his composing stick. "Clear out, Willie, and let me get to work! When next week's *Panamint Press* reaches Independence, I'll be looking for Sheriff Windy Dolan to arrive here by the first stage!"

A LITTLE more than a week later, Banning was frying eggs and potatoes in the rear of his shop one stifling noon when boot heels clacked up the steps and crossed the floor. He poked his head over the gunny sack partition, then smiled.

"Hello, sheriff," he greeted. "I've been looking for you the last couple days. Sit down and I'll dish up some feed."

Sheriff Windy Dolan stumped over to the stove and stood glowering at Banning. He was a medium-sized man in his forties, with a flabby mouth and pop eyes. A black suit, now covered with dust, hung on his loose frame, and he affected two Colt Peacemakers swung from a gunbelt under his open coat.

The sheriff popped his eyes at the printer. "Your name Colton Banning? Publisher of the *Panamint Press?* Hey?"

Banning grinned and turned an egg in the skillet.

"That's me. I also write the editorials, in case you're wondering."

Dolan did not smile. "That's all I want to know." He fished inside his coat and brought out a long paper that crackled stiffly as he extended it to Banning. "Here's something you've been itching for, young feller."

Banning wiped his hands on his apron before reaching for the document. He glanced at the heading, then swung his eyes back to Dolan.

"This is fine! A warrant for Tim Coggs, eh? About time, too. Now—"

The sheriff said coldly, "Better look at that paper a little closer, Mister! It ain't got Coggs's name on it—it's got yours!"

Banning's smile slid off his face. He looked at the warrant again, and this time he read it through. Then he turned a stricken face to the sheriff.

"Now see here, sheriff! I never meant anything like this! You're carrying things a little too far. Now—"

Dolan answered in a hard voice, "A summons for you to appear for a hearing on a charge of libel, Banning. It's all right there. I made out the paper myself, filed the complaint, and I'm taking you back to Independence on the stage tomorrow morning. You wanted action, you young smart aleck. And, by grab, you're going to get all you want!"

Banning stammered, appalled, "I only intended to—"

"Intentions don't cut no ice with the law! And you're gonna find out I don't let no penny-ante printer call me a blow-hard, coward, and fourflusher!" The sheriff spat on the plank floor and turned to go. "You be ready to leave with me on the morning stage, savvy?"

Banning's eggs were turning black around the edges, and the skillet was smoking acridly, but he didn't even notice. He looked at the sheriff and said:

"How about Tim Coggs? Are you taking him, too?"

Dolan retorted, "What for? According to your paper, Coggs was arraigned before your justice of the peace here, questioned, and fined. Far as the law is concerned, and me too, Coggs's case is closed and cleared."

Banning sputtered, "But—but—"

"No buts about it! Can't try a man twice on the same charge, you know!" Dolan stomped to the door. "I'll be looking for you at the depot in the morning. So long!"

Banning was stunned, but recovered quickly. He threw off his apron and put on his coat, then caught up his hat and hurried out of his shop. Willie Jones's office, a dirty and tattered tent with a rough board floor, was at the end of the street. Banning hurried toward it and burst through the open flap.

WILLIE was humped over some records on an unpainted wooden table in the middle of his office. He had his glasses low on his nose, which made him look like a startled owl.

"What's the hurry, young feller? Going to a fire?"

"No," Banning said shortly. "Looks like I'm going to jail."

Willie's head jerked back, and his glasses fell off. He caught them deftly before they fell to the floor. "Well, now! What for?"

Banning told him in a rush of words. "And I've got only until tomorrow morning to clear up this mess," he ended. "If I fail, Coggs'll be in a better position than ever to continue his banditry. With me in jail, and probably losing my paper and everything else, Coggs and his like will have a free hand in Panamint. The law will be a worse joke than before."

"Looks bad," Willie said, and scratched his chin. "Now, the Lord—"

Banning interrupted, "But there's one way out, Willie. We've got the sheriff here at last, even if he is on the wrong side. And Tim Coggs must be somewhere around close. He won't know yet that Windy Dolan is in town." Banning looked out the tent flap to see if anyone was within earshot, then leaned close to Willie Jones. "Now, if we could bring those two windbags together—"

Banning and the little justice of the peace got busy. The printer dropped in at the barber shop for a haircut he didn't need, and casually remarked to the loungers there that Sheriff Dolan from Independence was in Panamint on business.

"Looking for Tim Coggs," he mentioned, "the way I understand it. The sheriff doesn't seem satisfied with Coggs's story about the killing of Jim Holly."

In a few minutes the place was empty except for Banning and the barber. Banning smiled inwardly; the news would travel fast.

Down the street, Willie Jones was saying to a crowd in the Skeleton Saloon:

"Yep, reckon Coggs's scared to come to town today. Windy Dolan is visiting Panamint for the first time, and I don't guess he's here for a vacation."

One of the men at the bar detached himself from the group and went quietly outside. From the corner of his eye, Willie watched the fellow, and grinned. He knew the man; one of Tim Coggs's sidekicks, and an owl-hooter of the same breed. The man mounted a blaze-faced bay standing hipshot before the rail fronting the saloon, then swung his mount and headed out of town toward Surprise Canyon.

During the rest of the day, Banning and Willie Jones avoided each other. Willie, though, kept within easy jumping distance of Banning's print shop, to lend a hand in case of trouble.

Both the men had, at different times that afternoon and with studied casualness so as not to arouse suspicion, found a moment to seek out Sheriff Dolan and drop a hint that Tim Coggs might cook up some sort of devilment to show his defiance of the lawman's visit to Panamint.

Sheriff Dolan had shrugged. "Let Coggs leave me be, and I'll do the same for him. Far's I'm concerned, he's in the clear. But if he wants to kick up, I figure I can tame him down."

BANNING stayed in his shop all day, nervous as a bachelor at a sewing circle. Things were due to start popping any moment now, and on the outcome depended his whole future—and the future of Panamint too.

If his plans went right, both Sheriff Dolan and Tim Coggs would come face to face in his print shop before the night was over. What would happen then was something Banning

could only guess at, but he hoped for the best.

Too nervous from suspense to remain quiet more than a few minutes at a time, Banning busied himself around the shop. His press and type cases had needed attention for a long time, so now he began preparing to make a thorough job of cleaning his equipment. He got out a bag of rags, some brushes and a can of kerosene, and set to work.

From time to time he stopped to listen as footsteps sounded on the boardwalk in front of his shop, but returned to his work as they passed and died away. When darkness fell he lit the oil lamp over the press, then stepped to the rear of the room and built a fire in the cookstove for coffee.

While waiting for the water to boil, he went back to his cleaning. He was wringing out his cleaning rag in a pan of kerosene when a voice said behind him:

"Figuring on leaving, hey, Mister?" Sheriff Dolan stood in the doorway, scowling at the printer. "The justice down the street just tipped me off that you was fixing to skip out rather than face them libel charges I got against you. So, I just reckon I'll camp here with you tonight and make sure you don't get no funny ideas."

Willie Jones was on the job, Banning thought happily. "Come on in, sheriff. Coffee'll be ready in a few minutes. As for me skipping out—well, you know how people talk."

Dolan grunted and took the chair Banning pushed toward him. He shook his coattails out so his guns were in plain sight, then pulled a stogie from his vest pocket and scratched a match.

A shot crashed deafeningly in the small room, and the sheriff let out a startled squawk. He dropped his cigar and dived for the floor. Banning, too surprised to move, froze in the act of cleaning his press.

Tim Coggs, drunk as usual, stood just inside the door, a thin spiral of smoke lifting from the Colt in his right hand.

"A pretty pair of skunks!" the bullwhacker hiccupped. He cocked his gun and raised it. "Which one of you polecats wants to be first?"

The sheriff sat up on the floor and raised his hands. "Hold your hosses, pardner! I ain't got nothing against you!" His flabby face was spurting sweat, and not all of it was due to the heat of the desert night. He jerked a trembling thumb at Banning. "This here young smart aleck is the feller what started all this!"

Coggs weaved unsteadily forward, his pistol leveled. Banning edged around behind his press. There was nowhere else for him to go, nothing for him to do. Coggs sober was bad enough; drunk, he could kill as ruthlessly as a sidewinder.

Banning's eye fell on the bed of the press, and on the platen only a few inches above it. A quick jerk on the lever near his hand, and—

"Coggs!" he said sharply. A form carrying a setup for an order of handbills lay at one side of the bed of the press. Banning shoved it quickly under the platen, then motioned Coggs closer. "Before you start shooting, I want you to see this!"

TIM COGGS lurched to the press and regarded Banning's pointing finger with suspicion. "What's that? What's it got to do with me?"

Banning said, "It's an open letter to the public from an eyewitness to your killing of Jim Holly! It goes on the front page of next week's paper. Read it!"

Coggs bent over the form, then looked up blearily. "It's upside down. Feller can't read nothin' like that. But if I can't read it, I can sure change it!" He reached for the form with his free hand.

As Coggs's fingers touched the type, Banning threw his weight on the lever which forced the platen down to make an impression. Coggs let out a scream of pain. Banning snatched his

composing stick from the pocket of his apron and smashed the bullwhacker's gun hand. Coggs's pistol dropped to the floor and Banning booted it into a far corner.

"Now, Coggs," he ordered grimly, "let's have the truth about Jim Holly!" He put more pressure on the press lever, and Coggs shrieked again. "Start talking!"

"My hand! You're killing me! Yeow!" Coggs squalled.

"Talk!" Banning brought the lever down another fraction of an inch.

"All right! I done it! I held up the stage and shot Holly before he could move! Let me go! Ow-w-w!"

Sheriff Dolan got up off the floor and reached for his handcuffs. Banning released Coggs, who made a dive for the door. The sheriff got in his way, and Coggs caught him on the chin with his right hand. Then he halted. Willie Jones stood in the doorway with a sawed-off shotgun borrowed from the bartender at the saloon, and a crowd was gathering in the street behind him.

Tim Coggs wilted then. He held his injured hand and whimpered like a hurt bear cub. All the fight and wind had been taken out of him.

Banning helped the sheriff to his feet. Willie Jones lowered the hammer on his shotgun and said:

"Well, sheriff, I reckon you see how things are now, hey? Taking Coggs along with you in the morning, hey?"

Dolan nursed his jaw and glowered at the cringing owlhooter. "I sure am! Intent to kill, assaulting an officer, destroying property—I reckon Coggs'll be away from Panamint a long time!"

Willie Jones suggested, "You got the printer of Panamint to thank for it, don't forget that! From what we saw from the door, you didn't do much sheriffing while the ruckus was in progress."

Banning, smiling, spoke up: "Tell you what, sheriff. You drop those libel charges against me, send us a good deputy to maintain order in Panamint, and the paper will see that you get treated right in the account of Coggs's capture."

The sheriff nodded. "It's a deal." He went out, pushing Tim Coggs ahead of him.

When they were gone, Willie Jones and Banning looked at each other, then broke into wide grins.

"Well, Willie, looks like Panamint is on the way to fame and fortune. And we're going with it!"

Willie looked solemn. "It sure does. Now, the Lord—"

Banning grinned. "I know. The Lord helps those who help themselves. But don't forget the power of the press, Willie. It helps a lot, too. Ask Tim Coggs. He knows!"

Cold Deck for Two-Bit Jake

By Stephen Payne

Two-Bit Jake was one of the cow country's smartest crooks. But Two-Bit talked too much. And because he couldn't hobble his tongue, he cold-decked himself instead of putting through a shady dinero deal.

POSING as a rich cattle buyer, and using the honest-sounding name of John B. Williams, "Two-Bit" Jake put in at the Four Bar ranch one September evening.

Jake, who figured he was much, much too smart to work for a living, had tried a great many shady schemes to feather his nest, and of them all banditry held the least appeal. The rewards were too uncertain, the game too risky. Two-Bit Jake had quite recently found this out for himself while riding with outlaw Ben Morgan and his rip-tootin' boys on a certain Montana range.

Jake had pulled out of that bunch a couple of weeks ago, and Morgan hadn't expressed regret on losing a man of Jake's talents.

However, in addition to these talents of a questionable nature, Two-Bit Jake had the gift of gab. Furthermore, he did not look like a cheap, double-crossing crook, nor yet like a desperado. Jake was a blond and smiling young man who could look any square cowman in the eye while he lied faster than a horse can trot. He soon convinced Bill Hickman of Four Bar he was just what he represented himself to be.

And he had not been on the Four Bar two hours before he decided to

stick around for a spell. That was after he met old Bill's daughter, Patricia, and learned she was the ranchman's sole heir.

Hickman owned an outfit that was an outfit. In addition to a couple of thousand odd high-grade cattle, he raised horses. The kind of horses to make Ben Morgan's cold eyes kindle with the fire of greed. The kind Morgan loved to steal.

As John B. Williams, wealthy cattle buyer, Jake was treated almost as if he were royalty. He chuckled behind his hand when the tall and slender and dark-eyed girl showed him marked attention; chuckled silently when he was shown to a neat room in the main house, with sheets on the bed, and pajamas and clean shirts laid out for him.

THE following day he rode with the boss and Pat to look at fat young steers and other stock, but he stalled and stalled about buying anything. To allay suspicion he hatched up a story of how he was really on vacation. He'd been overworked in the stockyards at Chicago, pretty near had a breakdown. A month's rest on a ranch'd do him worlds of good. Hickman—poor sucker—rose to the hint. Sure, you betcher life, John Williams was more'n welcome to make himself right t'home.

"Man! Am I settin' pretty!" Two-Bit told himself. "But watch your step. Don't make no slip-up and mighty soon you'll have your halter on the pretty skirt. Pretty soft!"

Three days later his complacency received a jolt. And what a jolt! He'd heard of the dance in Larkspur and he smugly asked Pat to go with him. She hedged, and that evening a team and buckboard turned into the yard. A sun-leathered young cowhand all dressed up in his town clothes got out of the rig and was welcomed by Pat with a kiss.

Two-Bit Jake watched the young folks roll away toward Larkspur, and the expression in his eyes wasn't pleasant.

Later, playing penny ante with the ranch hands, he probed for the low-down on Pat's beau. Jim Scully had been a puncher on Four Bar. He'd saved his dough and finally had bought a half interest in a little spread over on Spring Creek with old-timer Fred Tait. And yeh, sure, things was all cut and dried between Jim Scully and Pat. As soon as he sorta got on his feet, or maybe sooner, she'd marry him.

"She will like heck!" thought Two-Bit Jake, burned up because he'd found a rock in his soft berth. He'd been looking far ahead. Marrying a ranch was the best and easiest way to get one, and this Four Bar was worth a hundred and fifty thousand smackers. Give that up without a fight? Not while he had his crafty senses. He lay awake figuring how to eliminate Jim Scully.

The scheme was pretty well worked out when Two-Bit Jake got up late the following morning and took himself off to Larkspur town. Here he wrote a letter to outlaw Ben Morgan, and enclosed the sealed letter in another envelope addressed to a certain honky-tonk owner who'd be sure to see that Morgan got it.

Two weeks rolled by with Two-Bit playing his hand for all it was worth. He wore Hickman's shirts and ties, slept in the guest room, ate Hickman's food, and he danced attendance on Miss Patricia Hickman. Whether or not he had the girl coming his way he could not be sure. She seemed to like him, and she seemed to be wavering in her loyalty to hard-working ranchman Jim Scully. Jim hadn't the time to give her a whirlwind rush. Nor did Jim seem aware of what was going on.

Dad Hickman was aware, though, and watching, the "stupid old coot"—Two-Bit reckoned Dad was pretty much on the fence. Sure, Dad liked sun-browned young Jim, but a right personable and wealthy cattle buyer might well prove a better match for his only daughter.

TIME winged swiftly, and yet it dragged, until Two-Bit heard from Morgan. The letter, addressed to John B. Williams, was very brief:

I'll meet you, place you mentioned, this Saturday night.

M.

The place was a pine-covered hillside west of the ranch buildings. Here Two-Bit Jake waited two hours for the notorious bandit. Morgan suddenly appeared in front of him as if by magic, a stocky man, past middle age; a roughly dressed, hard-looking fellow with harsh, weathered features and a steel-trap mouth.

Ben Morgan was one man the two-bit crook could not look in the eyes, nor had he ever understood the strange contradictions of the bandit's make-up. From other outlaws who knew Morgan well, Two-Bit Jake had heard that he'd go out of his way and risk his life to do some act—silly and uncalled-for, to Two-Bit's mind—to square his conscience with his code.

That code was something Two-Bit hadn't savvied, nor had he ever asked the rough, tough bandit to explain it to him.

"Morgan!" the slicker ejaculated low. "Where's your gang?"

Morgan looked him over by starlight filtering through pine branches. "I scouted this lay alone," he said.

"Good gosh! You needn't have worried I'd plan to trap you, old fox."

"No tellin'. A cool thousand bucks on my noodle is sorta temptin', Two-Bit. Where's them hosses?"

"In a right handy pasture off yonder," said Jake, pointing.

"Good 'nuff. I've already sized 'em up, know how to get 'em on the trail. Your letter hinted you had somethin' soft here. You figurin' to stay on this spread?"

"Sure. You bet. Now, Morg, there's a string on this big hoss steal. For tippin' you off, I want a little job done."

"Uh-huh. A string on the deal?" Morgan asked drily.

"You and the boys take the horses past a dinky ranch, which I'll tell you how to find. Two men at this place—young feller named Jim Scully, and an old stick-in-the-mud named Fred Tait. Surprise 'em, then kill Tait with Scully's gun and drop the gun where it'll be sure to be found. Tie Scully, get his saddle, chaps, spurs and so on, and his horse, and take them with you.

"Somewhere along the trail beef him and hide his body where it can't be found. That's all. The horses, nigh a hundred head of 'em, will pay you for your trouble and a darned sight more. I don't ask for a cut."

BEN MORGAN hunkered down and rolled a smoke. The silence drew out and tightened until Two-Bit snapped:

"You savvy it, don't you, Morg?"

"No. Who're Scully and Tait? What have they done to you?"

"Plenty. But why ask a lot of fool questions?"

"Sounded like you was figurin' to frame Scully for murderin' Tait and maybe also for stealin' the hosses. Is that the way of it?" Morgan asked in a flat, emotionless voice.

"Well, damn it—yes. You see it's a slick scheme. The old fool of a rancher, Hickman, who owns the horses, and his daughter are to believe—"

"Hickman's daughter? Where's she fit in?"

"Forget it, Morg. You're goin' to make a fat haul by playin'—"

"This girl and young Scully that way about one another? That why you want to frame him?"

"Now look here, Morg, I—well, I—"

"I got a good nose for bad smells, Two-Bit, and somethin' stinks around here. Reckon I've smelled out why you want that old feller shot and the young feller framed. I never done that kind of dirty work, never will."

"Uh—uh? I see. Bu-but—"

"But maybe you can get some skunk

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to do for you what you're scairt to do ourself, Two-Bit."

"Maybe," agreed the nonplused crook hopefully. "M o r g, I never thought—"

"Thought I'd turn you down. That's no compliment to me. Two-Bit, I didn't bring anybody with me, and like I said first thing, I sort of 'spected a trap, because of the big reward on my head. But o' course I needn't have worried. So long. I'll be driftin'."

The stocky outlaw turned and started away through the small pines. Two-Bit Jake uttered a gritty oath, then his eyes narrowed craftily and he whipped out his Colt. Dumb of Morgan to mention that reward for the second time! Two-Bit recalled that the notices read: *One thousand dollars, dead or alive!*

Now was his chance to collect that reward and get credit for killing the notorious bandit! That would strengthen his reputation here on Four Bar, and he'd be silencing the only man who knew his plan. Later, he'd get some unscrupulous snake to do his dirty work. The game was not lost!

As these thoughts flashed through his mind the crook fired at the outlaw's wide back. But in that same split second Morgan dropped flat against the earth, vanishing from Two-Bit's sight. In another moment he knew he hadn't hit Morgan, for the tlaw was speaking:

"Figured a double-crosser as low as you would try jus' that stunt, Two-Bit. I wanted you to try it. For now I can kill you. Come a'shootin'!"

CLAMMY sweat broke out on Two-Bit Jake. He had brought this shoot-out fight on himself, and of all men he feared Ben Morgan more than any other. Treacherous to the last, Jake yammered:

"My gun went off accidental. I didn't—"

"Dry up!" Morgan ripped. "Here I am. Cut loose!"

The outlaw was again on his feet, and Two-Bit could see him plainly. He fired wildly at the menacing figure. He heard his bullet strike a tree and whiz into space with a pinging sound. In the last moment of his life, just before something struck him and darkness closed around him, Two-Bit Jake hoarsely shouted:

"When I picked you to help me I cold-decked myself! . . ."

Sometimes the Hickmans and Jim Scully talk about the mystery killing on Four Bar.

Tracks of a shod horse were found leading north from the ranch. Cowboys and the local sheriff followed that trail for eight or more miles, then found themselves stumped. Baffled completely. Whoever rode that horse was a past master at confusing pursuers and hiding his trail. But why this unknown man came to Four Bar and met—as if by appointment for a duel to the death—Hickman's guest and killed him in fair fight is still an unsolved mystery.

For the outlaw who can explain it never advertises his good deeds. Ben Morgan didn't even explain fully to his partners in banditry when he returned to his hideout.

They asked, "Where're the hosses you rode to steal, and where's Two-Bit Jake?"

And Morgan answered, "The way this play turned out, I didn't want to steal them hosses. Two-Bit got what he had comin'." He tapped the handle of his Colt .45. "'Nuf sed."

STAMPEDE

Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

THERE'S always plenty of room in Powder River Bill's corral for you writin' rannyhans' You can rope yourselves pen pards from all around the map and hogtie letters galore. You can swap snapshots with amigos from faraway places, and exchange souvenirs of your favorite haunts with writing pards from all over the world. And don't forget Powder River Bill. He wants to know what kind of fiction fare you all like the best, and what Western authors you cotton to the most. WESTERN TRAILS aims to give you the tops in cow-country stories by writers well equipped in spinning yarns that grip the interest of you buckaroos who use the armchair saddle.

Range ranny from Down Under.

Dear Bill:

After reading WESTERN TRAILS for months, I decided to write and ask you to help me out with a few pen pards. I am 17 years old, weigh 143 pounds and am 5 feet, 6 inches tall. My favorite hobbies are riding and camping.

I think WESTERN TRAILS is the best magazine I've ever read, and always look forward to your next issue.

Yours faithfully,

"BRANDY" FAIR,
c/o H. Rogers,
92 Richmond St.,
Kedron N. E.,
Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

A plea from *Deep in the Heart of Texas.*

Dear Bill:

I live out here in the Lone Star State, and sometimes get kind of lonesome. I would like to hear from pen pals, boys and girls, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. I am twenty years old, have brown hair and blue eyes.

I've several hobbies, among which are collecting pennants and photos of people. My favorite sports are dancing and horseback riding.

I promise to answer each letter, so come on and send some mail down here "Deep in the Heart of Texas."

Sincerely,

MISS BILLIE FERGUSON,
622 N. Della Ave.,
Tyler, Texas.

PARDNER PETE'S Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch of their snapshot send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like cowboy songs, write to

VICTOR MARKS
7127 S. Washtenau Avenue
Chicago. Ill.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written about their picture, send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore, Michigan

—and—

STANLEY C. DeCAMP
c/o Gen'l Delivery, Galion, Ohio

Paging pen pals from everywhere.

Dear Bill:

I have just started reading WESTERN TRAILS and think it is swell. How about getting me some pen pals? I am a brunette, sixteen years old, weigh 117 pounds, and my height is five feet three inches.

Would like to hear from pen pals all over the world. I promise to answer all letters promptly.

'Bye, now,

PAULINE HUGHES,
Route No. 2, Fairview,
Decatur, Ala.

"Nevada" Smith will answer all letters.

Dear Bill:

I never before looked at any special Western story book, but I now find that I always pick out WESTERN TRAILS. It is my favorite.

I have been hunting for pen pals without much luck for quite some time, and it's mighty disappointing when there are no answers.

I am seventeen, stand a little over five feet, and weigh 118 pounds. My hair is brown, and I have gray eyes. I do wish you could find room on your *Stampede* page for my urgent plea.

I play the guitar, sing and yodel. I am very interested in ranching, as all my family were ranchers at one time. I promise to answer all letters and make mine interesting. I also have a nickname, "Nevada," which my friends use.

Most sincerely,

VIOLET SMITH,
400 Hancock St.,
Springfield. Mass.

Here's a pard for all you curio collectors.

Dear Bill:

I read WESTERN TRAILS regularly and would like to have some pen pards. I am seventeen years old and live on a ranch in Reeves County. Would like to write to boys and girls from the ages of fifteen to twenty. I'll send curios, etc., to my pen pards.

Sincerely,

CHARLES HOEFS,
417 S. Park,
Pecos, Texas.

An' listen, folks, don't forget to send in your ballots. Here's the ballot. Just mark "1"—"2"—"3"—"4"—an' so on, in the order of your likin'.

Adios, amigos—till next time.

Tophand Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS

67 West 44th Street. New York, N. Y.

LEE E. WELLS *Red Runs the Rio*	____
GUNNISON STEELE *The Make-Believe Marshal*	____
BARRY GARDNER *Polecat Payoff*	____
J. EDWARD LEITHEAD *Owlhoot Badge-Toter*	____
MARTIN WOLSEY *Boom Town Betrayers*	____
C. WILLIAM HARRISON *Colt Mission for a Peaceful Hombre*	____
S. and I. RICHIN *Vigilante Vengeance*	____
FELIX FLAMMONDE *Powdersmoke in Panamint*	____
STEPHEN PAYNE *Cold Deck for Two-Bit Jake*	____
WILSON L. COVERT *Empty Holsters*	____

Name .....

Address .....

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.

Neighbors began to suspect old Bibb Sawyer of longriding because he seemed to be every rustler's amigo. But it didn't make horse sense to Jerry Corbin, stock detective, for Bibb was gun-shy, and cattle thieves don't have . . .

Empty Holsters

By
Wilson L. Covert

IT LOOKED like a piece of rank carelessness for a cow thief to leave his hardware out of reach. Jerry Corbin was heating an extra cinch ring in a brush fire, about to lift it out with green willow twigs, when a voice spoke mildly from the edge of the arroyo:

"That's a Block S critter, boy, and don't need brandin' twice."

Corbin, young and sharp-featured, dropped the makeshift tongs and jumped for the horse holding the whale-line taut on the hogtied calf. His gunbelt hung on the saddle horn, and the stock of a Winchester stuck up from under the rosadero. But he paused midway between the fire and the bronco at the next words of the newcomer:

"No call to grab your shootin'-iron, younker. I don't go armed."

Corbin knew it was old Bibb Sawyer from the description given him of the Block S owner. He was lean and dried looking, like old leather, and his white spade-beard added a patriarchal touch. The Block S was the oldest brand in Vaca Valley, Arizona. Numerous other spreads dotted its lush acres, and for years Sawyer's neighbors had regarded him as a little peculiar but harmless. Now, bitten with suspicion, they wondered whether he wasn't foxy instead, hadn't been fooling them all the time.

Seeing Corbin stop in his tracks, Bibb kicked his horse down the side of the arroyo and reined up close by the staring rustler. The faded old eyes studied him without rancor. Corbin had intended the branding-fire should be noticed or he wouldn't have built it so close to ranch headquarters.

"What's your name?" Sawyer asked, and when Jerry told him, he went on, "Can't be you're workin' with Magill's gang or they'd 'a' warned you against botherin' my cows. New here and on your own, eh? Suppose you get the piggin'-strings off that calf and ride over to the house with me."

"So your outfit can hang me to a cottonwood limb?" Corbin's gray eyes narrowed. "I'm not that green."

"You are, though," Sawyer half smiled, "or you'd know I leave the handlin' of rustlers to the sheriff or any of my neighbors who feel like goin' on an unofficial manhunt."

Jerry Corbin was not surprised at this speech. In fact, he was prepared for it. The question he had come to settle was whether Bibb Sawyer was what he seemed. He wanted a chance to size up the old cowman without a gun-wrangle, and had purposely left his shooting-irons on the saddle for that reason.

Young Corbin jerked the tie-ropes from the calf's legs, helped it up by twisting its tail. The animal went blatting down the arroyo, and Jerry turned to mount. He left the cinch ring in the dying fire and scrambled out of the dry watercourse beside Sawyer.

"Usually invite cow thieves to your ranch?" the younger man asked, while the horses jogged toward a group of 'dobe buildings about a mile easterly. "If they know it, I should think your neighbors'd get the notion you're on the rustle yourself."

"My neighbors understand," replied Bibb Sawyer. "Was a time when I packed a gun. An accident happened. Enemies were lookin' for me in a cowtown near here. Mistakin' my best friend for one of 'em in the dark, I killed him dead. I ain't fired a gun since."

Corbin, perceiving how the oldster's features contracted at the remembrance, was almost ready to believe he was on the wrong scent. "But about havin' rustlers as your guests, Sawyer?"

"I don't encourage them to come," said the old cowman, "but I've never turned a hungry man from my door. I've found that by leavin' the rustlers be, they leave me be. I know my neighbors have plenty of trouble with 'em, and I wish it wasn't that way. But I won't touch a gun."

"Just because of that shootin' years ago?" asked Jerry.

Bibb nodded. "It's taught me somethin'. The man who ain't always diggin' up a smoke-pole stays above ground longer. By not warrin' with rustlers I've kept my outfit in shape to pass along to my son Joel. He's been gone ten years this July comin', but I still have hopes he'll return before I die. Well, here we are, Corbin."

THEY stopped at a gate and Sawyer leaned from the saddle to lift the latch. As they dismounted at a corral, two men slouched out of a near-by barn. Both wore low-slung guns, and neither looked like the sort of ranch hand an honest cattleman would hire.

"Who's the pickup, boss?" asked one. "We don't seem to know him."

"Jerry Corbin," said the rancher.

Then he added, "This is my foreman, Crowe, and one of the hands, Moore. Corbin's new in the valley. He was heatin' a cinch ring to run on a calf of ours. I've brought him along for a talk, and grub, if he's hungry."

Crowe and Moore squinted at Jerry's wide shoulders as he turned toward the main adobe building with Bibb. The minute they stepped into the cool half-light of the living room, Corbin's eyes fell upon the portrait of a young man in an old-fashioned oval frame. The portrait did not even slightly resemble the rancher.

Corbin started. He had looked into those bold dark eyes over the sights of a gun about a year ago, in a small Wyoming cowtown. In his memory, shredded gunsmoke covered that youthful face, which had been older and harder then, but undoubtedly the original of the portrait. Bibb noted the direction of Corbin's gaze and his face lighted up.

"That's Joel! Taken the same year he quit the ranch. We had a little fallin' out and he went away mad. Never have got a line from him, but the feelin's still strong he'll be back some day."

Corbin suddenly had the feeling that he wanted to get away from the Block S immediately. It was strange how trails crossed sometimes. Sawyer wasn't the name by which he had known the young man of the portrait. He had known him as "Stinger Joe," and he had been wanted for brand blotting.

The gun with which Stinger Joe had fatally resisted arrest, a Colt .45 with a wolf's head carved in the ivory buttplates, was stowed in Jerry's saddlebags at that moment. He never wore it unless he had need of an extra shooting-iron.

While Bibb rambled on about his son, who should one day carry on the business established by his father, Corbin kept his eyes averted. He couldn't tell the old man that Joel would never return. Not now, anyway.

Finally Bibb waved a hand. "Sit down and tell me about yourself, Jerry. Whatever started you on the crooked trail?"

Corbin dropped into a chair by an open window. Before he had a chance to tell Sawyer anything, his attention was drawn to a rider watering his horse at the trough by the corral. Crowe and Moore were talking to him, and all three suddenly faced the house. They couldn't fail to see Corbin at the window. The rider swung down, and the trio approached the flat-roofed dwelling, but separated at the door. The Block S hands vanished around a corner.

Bibb Sawyer, lighting a pipe, looked up at the new arrival. He was a tall, mustached man in snake-banded Stetson and dust-whitened *chaparejos*. Two guns were in his crossed belts.

"Didn't hear your horse, Magill," said Sawyer.

Magill. Corbin didn't show that the name made any impression, but he knew that before him stood the leader of the Vaca Valley stock raiders.

"Howdy, Bibb?" returned the rustler, his glance centered on the man by the window. "Got a new hand?"

"I thought of persuadin' him," said Sawyer. "Don't seem right for a young fellow like him to steal for a livin'."

Magill chuckled. "You don't approve of my profession. I don't expect you to. I came by to ask a favor, Bibb. We'll be careful, so it won't make you any trouble. Your neighbors have blocked us from shippin' by the old route by puttin' a brand inspector on the job. The straightest trail to another railroad is south, through that pass in the Cocopahs on your range. I'd like permission to—"

"No, Magill." Bibb's tone was emphatic. "I won't fight you fellows, but I won't help you, either. If I let you use the pass, my neighbors would have a right to class me as a stock thief."

"Your neighbors," said Magill, with rising inflection, "are not so trustful of you lately, Bibb. In fact, they've sent a man to spy on you."

Jerry Corbin gathered himself to spring out of the chair. Magill evidently had his own way of getting information.

"Why," Sawyer looked bewildered, "that's ridiculous! Nothin' crooked about this ranch. A spy!"

"There he sits!" Magill said pointing at Corbin, but making no move to draw.

Corbin knew why shortly. Just as his right hand went streaking down, a voice spoke from a doorway to the left:

"Up with the mitts, waddy-chaser!"

Jerry half turned. Crowe and Moore, having catfooted in by a rear entrance, stood stiffly behind leveled Colts. Whether they were afflicted with itching trigger-fingers, or feared his dangling weapon would pitch to horizontal despite their advantage of him. Corbin detected thumb movement preceding the fall of hammers.

His gun slanted up, letting go with a roar that rolled back at him as Crowe, hard hit, loosed a shot and folded. He lay twitching at Moore's feet. Leaded through the right wrist, Moore grabbed his six-shooter with the other hand. He flipped the death tube on his tall target as Corbin's .45 bucked again.

The scream that issued from Moore's lips didn't drown the sound of a scuffle near by. Moore, dropping his gun, wheeled slowly to grope through the doorway. Then he tripped over Crowe, fell sprawling full length, and ceased to move. Corbin whirled on the struggling figures of Magill and Sawyer, just as the old rancher was hurled against a table, upsetting it. Bibb had kept Jerry from being shot in the back, but Magill fired at the instant Jerry faced him. Corbin felt himself falling, his finger nerveless on the trigger.

"Glancin' shot!" exclaimed Magill, his eyes darting down. "I ought've aimed lower, but that'll do!" He advanced and caught up Corbin's gun by the trigger-guard.

THE boss rustler didn't ask Sawyer's aid in securing Jerry. Bibb hurried over to prod Crowe and Moore, finding there wasn't a spark of life in either one.

"What'd they want to shoot at Corbin for," the cowman said worriedly, "if he *is* a stock detective?"

"You might ask 'em," retorted Magill, derisively. "I have it straight that Corbin's a range snooper and he's goin' with me."

Sawyer came over to look at the bound man, whose eyelids were fluttering. "Leave him with me, Magill, and get on your horse. I'll be blamed for anything that happens to him."

"Just tell 'em," said the rustler, "that he left your ranch in good shape. You couldn't be in a worse fix with your neighbors, anyhow."

Corbin's eyes were open and Magill pulled him roughly to his feet.

"Too bad you're gun-shy, Sawyer," remarked Jerry, coolly, "or we could put this cow thief where he belongs. I'm satisfied you're no crook, but you'd do well to check up on the men workin' for you."

Sawyer thought it was a good suggestion as he stood out in the sun and watched Magill trot westward with his prisoner. The Block S personnel had changed with the passing years, as old hands left the ranch or died.

Bibb was much in the saddle during the next two or three days. There was no doubt that rustlers were nibbling at his herd. Outsiders couldn't have done it without the help of Bibb's cowhands. Hence his men had either looked the other way or assisted in the rustling. Stealing him blind they were —dissipating Joel's inheritance so that, if he hadn't discovered it in time, Bibb wouldn't have owned any cows when his boy came home.

The proof of treachery worked a change in the old cowman which he was at pains to conceal from his men. He had been living in a fool's paradise and he was grateful to Jerry Corbin for the awakening. The least he could do to repay Corbin was to re-

lease him from captivity, that is if Magill hadn't already killed the stock detective. And the rustlers should suffer for stealing behind Bibb's friendly back.

One morning Sawyer hitched up a light wagon and drove to Hilary, the only town in Vaca Valley. The storekeeper was a little surprised at Bibb's request for all the dynamite he had on hand. The cowman put the box of explosives in the wagon and covered it with a tarp.

About to seat himself for the homeward drive, Sawyer halted as a voice boomed at him from a saloon front part way up the street. Several men stood on the sidewalk, beckoning vigorously. The very men he didn't want to meet, his neighbors in the valley. Not wanting them crowding around the wagon, he trudged up the street.

"Just come in after some grub," Sawyer said. He had bought some, too.

Matt Hollister, of the 86 ranch, whom Bibb never had liked over-much, dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Seen anything of a stranger over your way, Bibb? Young fellow, sharp-faced—"

"Yes," said Sawyer. "I understand you sent him."

The cattlemen exchanged glances, and Hollister continued, menacingly, "Where is Corbin? He promised to report to us in a day or two."

"I appreciate you boys' interest in my affairs," said Bibb acidly, "but, havin' nothin' to hide, I didn't suspect Corbin's real errand till Magill stopped by. He was better informed than me, and over my protest, took Corbin in tow when he left."

"He admits Magill was there, too!" Hollister gritted and swung the oldster against the saloon front with a violent hand. "I reckon Corbin's dead, you sneakin' old cow thief! We oughta hoist you to that pole yonder!"

The rest crowded closer, muttering wrathfully. Sawyer twisted out of Hollister's grasp. A new note in his voice commanded attention.

"I'll prove I'm no more a rustler than any of you fellows! If I see to it that Corbin turns up alive and rout out every rustler in the valley, askin' nobody to give a hand, will that satisfy you?"

There were doubtful snorts from some.

"He only wants to skip, now we've caught him!" declared the 86 owner.

Sawyer drew himself up. "Me skip, when my boy Joel may return any day? I'll be in the valley to welcome him, don't you fret!"

"I think," said another cattleman, "we ought to give Bibb a chance to make good on his proposition, say several days. We'll never find Magill's hide-out by lookin' for it."

The others agreed, though Matt Hollister was the last to do so. As Bibb started back to his wagon, Matt said:

"Just the same, I believe Bibb's head of that gang. Since we cut 'em off at the railroad, they may try to shove cattle through that mountain pass on the Block S, and we ought to watch it."

Arriving home, Sawyer hid the dynamite in an unused 'dobe and was returning to unhitch his team when Denison, one of the hands, strolled up.

"Been to town," observed Denison.

"Yeh," said Bibb, "and come within an ace of gettin' hung. If I doubted Magill when he said my neighbors had turned against me, I sure had it proved to me today. I'd as well have the game as the name, Denison. I want you to take me to Magill—now!"

Denison said, "How would I know where he is?"

Bibb gave a dry chuckle, though that wasn't the way he felt. "You oughta know. You've been workin' for him right along, you and the rest of my riders."

SAWYER couldn't have found the two cabins and cattle-filled corrals, tucked away in the hills, by himself. As Denison led him toward the larger cabin, the door was flung wide and Magill stood there, a couple of his rustlers looking over his shoulders. Magill did not smile until Bibb, slid-

ing from the saddle, stated the reason he had persuaded Denison to bring him.

"Let's go inside," said the rustler chief.

Sawyer peered through the gathering shadows as he crossed the threshold, discovering Jerry Corbin, unshaven but apparently unhurt, trussed up and lying on a bunk.

"Howdy, old gun-shy!" greeted the stock detective. "Never expected to see you here. Magill's been real hospitable. He likes the way I sling a smoke-iron, and he's been tryin' to make a rustler of me. I tell him I've been too long on the other side of the fence."

"So your good neighbors tried to hang you," Magill grinned at Bibb, "and that changed your mind, eh? You'll let us go through the pass as we please. We could do it without your say-so, Bibb."

"Not without me catchin' you," Sawyer said, "and puttin' the sheriff wise. That's why you came to get permission in the first place."

"I'll admit it," nodded Magill. "But in return you're askin' me to release Corbin. I can't do that, seein' what he is."

"You'll have to!" said Bibb, excitedly. "If I don't make good the boys'll string me up. And it won't be safe for you if somebody else runs the Block S."

Magill shifted his gaze to the stock detective. "If Corbin will drop his case against us, I might consent."

"He's got to appear before Hollister and them to clear me," reminded Sawyer.

"It'd be the same," said Magill, "if he went to Sheriff Grogan and told him he's quittin'. Denison, here, could go along and make sure that Corbin heads out of the county afterward."

Bibb spoke eagerly to the man on the bunk. "You'll do it, won't you, Jerry? To save both our lives? Not that I'm afraid to die, but I don't want folks tellin' Joel his old man was hung for stealin'. And I'd like to see that boy

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A lump rose in Corbin's throat. Magill's proposal didn't ring true. Jerry knew the rustler would never take his word to quit the trail, but, after apparently considering the matter, he said:

"All right, it's a deal. But I want my guns back. Sheriff will figure I was bought off and may get ugly."

"Sure," Magill agreed, with a twisted smile. "Fetch his horse, one of you fellows. I suppose, Bibb, you think I played it low-down on you to let you hire my men, but business is business. When you go home, send the rest of 'em here. I'll run them cattle outside through the pass tomorrow and need all the help I can get."

Sawyer waited nervously until Corbin and Denison had ridden off in the dark toward town, then he set forth to the Block S.

Jerry had left the ivory-handled .45 in his saddlebags when he prepared to leave the rustler hide-out. With the Colt on his hip, the Winchester in his saddle-holster, he should be able to give a good account of himself.

As he and Denison loped north, the rustler was so talkative that Corbin suspected him of trying to distract attention from the back trail. Heedless of the other's chatter, Jerry finally caught the distant plop-plop of trailing hoofs. He waited until the sound grew louder, then, leaning suddenly toward his companion, poked his six-shooter in Denison's ribs.

"Change hats with me!" he rasped.

Corbin was wearing a high-crowned Stetson; Denison's hat was a low-crowned felt, with an even wider brim. And Jerry understood now how his death was to be compassed. The killer sent after them by Magill would wait until they were clearly sky-lined and target the rider under the ten-gallon hat.

Denison protested, "You gone loco? That John B.'s a better conk cover than mine!"

"No argument," snapped Corbin, "or I'll tunnel you!"

They were already ascending higher ground and would soon reach the top of a rise. Denison evidently realized he was in deadlier peril from the gun stuck in his side than the one down the trail. His rustler pal might miss; Corbin wouldn't.

Swearing, the rustler switched hats. Just as their figures became outlined against the lighter backdrop of sky, Denison threw a spur into his horse. But a Winchester cracked on the back trail. Denison swayed a moment on his plunging mount, then pitched down sideways.

GALLOPING over the rise, Corbin hauled out his Winchester. He kept it in his hand for a couple of hard-ridden miles in the event that the bushwhacker, discovering he had killed the wrong man, decided to pursue him. He arrived at Hilary on the run and woke up Sheriff Grogan. The peace officer was loath to get going that night.

"Magill will figure he has plenty of time to shove the cattle through the Cocopah pass before you get up a posse, Corbin. There's no real fightin' men in town, and you can help us both by makin' the rounds of the ranches early in the mornin'. What about Sawyer allowin' 'em to use that pass?"

"He only did it to get me off," replied the stock detective. "Bibb is straight as a string."

Leaving Hilary at sunup, Corbin visited the outfits in the valley and was surprised to learn that nearly every man had ridden over to the Cocopah Mountains. All the cowboys he interviewed told the same story, that their bosses believed Sawyer and Magill would attempt a getaway with any stolen stock they had on hand by the pass trail.

It was then midday. With the rustlers and the cattlemen both heading for the same point, a big battle was in prospect, and there wasn't time for Jerry to return for the sheriff if

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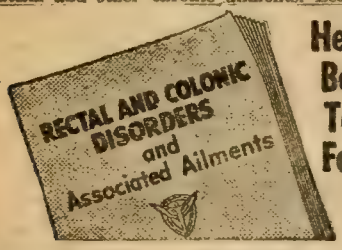

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he wanted to be in it at the finish.

He hit a gallop for Sawyer's range, seeing nothing of the rustler hunting party on the way. The frowning crags of the Cocopahs rose in front of him, and still there was no sign of the cowmen. But he saw the dust of a herd approaching the wide break in the mountain wall. Corbin turned his sweating bronc to the right, slid to the bottom of a cut bank, and worked his spurs.

The van of the herd was three hundred yards from the pass when a Winchester tuned up from a nest of boulders fronting it. The bullet lifted a rustler from his single-footing bronc. Magill rode forward, unshipping his saddle-gun, his face convulsed. Another slug from the rocks made him duck and he shouted:

"Hold the herd, boys! Dollars to horseshoes that's our late prisoner tryin' to get gay by his lonesome!"

Corbin's next shot ripped the hat from Magill's head. Magill quit the saddle hastily, laid rifle barrel across the leather seat. Only by the wind-split smoke could he tell where Corbin was located. The rustler chief sent a bullet rattling against the face of a boulder, and the stock detective promptly answered, nicking Magill's horse. It bounded away, leaving him unsheltered.

The cow thief dropped swiftly, to shoot from a ground rest, but as he fell, the swifter lead of Corbin dusted him on both sides. Magill was dying as he pushed his rifle in front of him for a last shot. A few of his mates were throwing the leading cattle off the trail. Most of them went hammering by the fallen boss-man, centering their rifle fire on Jerry's covert.

The stock detective was downing riders from their saddles with a regularity that chilled the wildly rushing riders, when suddenly the pass seemed to blow up. A dense smoke poured from it; rock debris filled the air. Half-stunned by the concussion, Corbin lurched to his feet and groped past the protecting boulders. There

was no immediate danger from his enemies. They were quirting to get away from that rock-raining mountainside. Jerry had stumbled but a dozen paces when a flying fragment struck him down.

HE lay unconscious while the pass, for two hundred yards, became choked with earth and boulders. While the cattle bolted, the leaderless gang faced justice. A mob of horsemen suddenly appeared over the rim of the plain. All through the hurly-burly of fighting, Jerry was sunk in oblivion. He first became conscious of hoofbeats close by and of the voice of Matt Hollister, saying:

"Reckon they aimed to blow up the pass to keep us from followin', but one of the gang was too quick to shoot the works. Since Bibb ain't here, he must be at the ranch. He didn't expect we'd show up till he was on the other side of the Cocopahs. Nothin'll stop us this time from fitting him with a hemp cravat!"

They rode away without having discovered Corbin. The stock detective never doubted Sawyer's innocence, but, unaware of the oldster's plan for destroying the Magill gang, it appeared to him that Bibb's only safety lay in a temporary absence from the Block S. He must reach Bibb ahead of those erring cattlemen.

Jerry caught a riderless horse. Scattered bunches of cattle dotted the plain in the shadow of the Cocopahs. Ranchers and cowboys were riding to and fro. Unnoticed, Corbin shot away on the trail to ranch headquarters. When he had covered a mile or so, he saw Hollister leading a party in the same direction. Still holding his mile lead, Jerry flung down in front of the main adobe. He shouted Sawyer's name as he rushed inside.

"Here, Corbin," came the answer from the living room.

Jerry faced a haggard-looking Bibb, just rising from an armchair.

"Out the back way and hit the trail on your fastest bronc!" Corbin cried.

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"Hollister and them are on their way to carry out that lynchin' threat!"

"Do the fools think I'm a rustler?" exclaimed Bibb. "I kept my word to 'em by sendin' you back alive and destroyin' the raiders. Let them go down to the pass and see what happened. I hated to do it, but Magill double-crossed me, and he was robbin' Joel as well as—"

"You set off that dynamite," gasped Corbin, "to wipe out the rustlers?"

Sawyer nodded glumly. "I watched from early mornin' for 'em to come. Attached a double length of fuse, so that every last one of them would be caught in the blast. Then I hit for home. Couldn't wait nowhere near for it to go off. I'm no murderer at heart. I was pushed into this. It must have been awful."

Corbin exclaimed, "You needn't worry about havin' spilled any blood, Bibb! The rustlers have been put out of business, but by lead, not dynamite. They hadn't reached the pass when the explosion came, because I was fightin' them. Your neighbors figure it was done to—wait!" He swung round to lock the hall door, for the lynch-bent cattlemen couldn't be far from the ranch.

As he turned, Bibb noticed for the first time the ivory-handled gun, which Jerry had buckled on his left side before leaving town. In his excitement he had completely forgotten it. He thought nothing of the fact that Sawyer stepped after him until, with a wild outcry, the oldster snatched the weapon from its scabbard. Corbin wheeled to meet eyes that blazed with a half-insane light. Stinger Joe's six-gun covered the stock detective.

"Where'd you get it?" shouted Bibb. "I had this Colt made special for Joel, as a gift on his twenty-first birthday. There's only one way you could've come by the shootin'-iron. You killed Joel!"

Corbin stared back, not moving a muscle.

"I wasn't sure whether to tell you

or not, Bibb, seein' how you clung to the hope of Joel's return. I knew him the minute I saw that portrait yonder. It'd be best if I just admit he's dead and don't go into details."

"Tell 'em!" The blue-veined hand gripping the pistol was rock-steady. "Then I'll kill you. I ain't handled a gun since that night I drilled my best friend. And this'll positively be the last time."

"If you shoot me," argued Jerry, "then ranchers will hang you sure. They must be close now."

"With Joel gone," retorted Bibb, "I've got nothin' to live for. Why did you murder him?"

"It wasn't murder," said Jerry, calmly. While he was telling how Stinger Joe had come to the end of his trail, hoofs pounded in the yard. Then boots crunched on gravel, scuffed in the hall. Some heavy object smashed a panel in the locked door, and Bibb's glance went past Jerry to a face at the splintered aperture. Corbin grabbed the ivory-handled gun from Sawyer and pivoted, flipping out his other Colt.

"Before you men bust in," he barked, "I'd like to ask if you agreed Sawyer would clear himself by settin' me loose and windin' up Magill's gang?"

"Yes," answered several voices, Hollister's coming in as a faint echo.

"Well," said Corbin, "I'm alive this minute because of Bibb. He would have finished the rustlers, too, blotted 'em out in the pass, if that dynamite he planted hadn't exploded a little too soon. Can't blame him for that. I shot my share of the Magill gang, and the case is closed. Figure you ought to apologize for suspectin' and threatenin' a good, upstandin' neighbor."

"But," objected Hollister, at the broken panel, "we just seen him holdin' a gun on you, Corbin."

"That's another matter entirely," retorted Corbin, grimly, "and don't concern you fellows."

There was an uneasy movement of feet in the hallway, then a rancher

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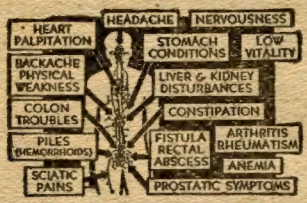

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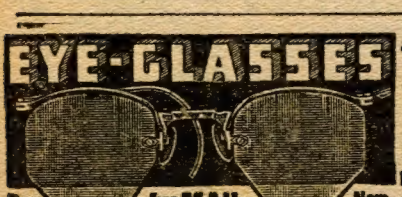

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exclaimed, "Sorry for all the trouble we've caused you, Bibb! If you'll open the door, we'd like to shake your hand."

Corbin smiled and his six-shooters dipped toward holster-tops. "Leave the handshakin' till Bibb feels more in the mood for it."

They filed out of the hall, out of the house and remounted. From a window Jerry watched them depart. Bibb was again sunk in his armchair. Suddenly he spoke:

"I oughtn't to acted toward you like I did, Jerry. I know you told it true about Joel. I was afraid he'd go to the bad. We had that quarrel over some brand work he'd done."

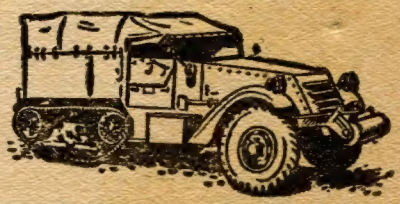
Corbin still looked out the window. "I plumb regret it was me had to wind up his career, Bibb. But if it weren't me, then it would have been some other lawman."

"And I've got nothin' to live for," Bibb muttered. "Unless—"

His pause was so prolonged that Jerry faced about. Sawyer was looking at him with a new attention.

"Maybe," said the old cowman, "the fates are tryin' to make up for my loss—sendin' you, since Joel couldn't come. You're the kind of a young fellow I wanted him to be. Would it tempt you to quit ramblin' and trippin' up rustlers if I was to let you run this ranch?"

"Try me," replied Jerry, with an affectionate grin.



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